

# A Clashing of Ways

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Summary: Ten years have passed since the Human-Covenant War ended and the birth of the Species Assembly has brought peace to the Galaxy.

Or, at least their part of it. The discovery of a Mass Relay sparks yet another war that will have consequences for all sides involved.

The Galaxy will never be the same. Disclaimer: I do not own the franchises.

## 1. The Beginning

It was a wonderful thing, Kialn believed, to be working as a researcher with the humans. They had such understanding of Forerunner technology and even working understanding of her own, Sangheili technology. Now, they were working to understand the technology of another ancient race, one that neither the humans nor her own people had ever seen before. She shook her head admiringly at the progress that they had made in the two short weeks they had been working on this new, big artifact.

It had been discovered in the edges of a new human colony world called Eden Prime. It had a sleek appearance, like one of the energy swords that her father used during the Human-Covenant war. Though, where the handle would have been there were two giant rings that could and would, if all their theories were correct, revolve. One thing they did know for certain, it wasn't Forerunner.

"Commander Taylor, I am detecting an energy spike in the artifact," Susan, the human AI announced. That was another reason Kialn enjoyed working with humans, their AIs were so fascinating and powerful. "Gravitation fluctuations are also affecting the artifact. I am uncertain as to the reasons."

"Helm, activate shields," Commander Taylor's order caused a stir among many of the senior scientist.

"Commander, you can't be serious!" the lead scientist protested.

"That could interfere with our readings!"

"The SA council charged me with the safety of you scientist, professor," He looked in Kialn's direction, "all scientists." Kialn firmly pressed her jaws together, another xenophobe. Even with the creation of the Species Assembly five years ago, there were still many beings on all sides that resented the other for the Human-Covenant war. The humans mainly because the role the former Covenant members had in trying to exterminate them. The former Covenant members, well, some of them still agreed with the 'Prophets' declarations. It didn't help their attitude that humans were the Reclaimers. She personally didn't agree with either group, but she understood them.

Twisting her head, she looked at the main holotable displaying the artifact, watching the changes that were taking place. The rings began revolving and a blue ball of energy formed in the center of the spinning rings. Raising her left hand, she activated her Light-Comp, another marvelous human invention that was barely beginning to be popular among the Sangheili worlds. The hard light controls and screen formed around her forearm, forming the main body of the Light-Comp. Linking her Light-Comp to the Shanxi's sensors, she studied the power readings coming off the artifact. "Susan," the human named rolled off her tongue with practiced ease, "are these readings correct."

"Yes Science Master Kialn. It appears that the energy levels are beginning to stabilize. The gravitation fluctuations are also stabilizing. It should be safe to deactivate our shields and approach even closer in a few moments."

"Doctor Lawson," that name gave her a bit of trouble. English still wasn't her greatest strength, but she didn't want to depend on her team members having implants. "What do you think? It certainly isn't Forerunner in design and as far as I can tell it is somehow locked into this orbit of Eden Prime." She would get it right someday.

His eyes narrowed, staring at the hologram. "How do you know that it's locked in orbit?"

"When we were salvaging High Charity, we had to lock its orbit until we could get enough power plants to bring it back online. I aided in that. That is why I was chosen for this." She tapped a few keys on her Light-Comp. "I compared all the data we have on the artifact and noticed from the position data that it's keeping orbit."

"Hmm. And it doesn't look like a weapon."

"A portal device maybe?" The accented scientist spoke up, Kialn couldn't remember his name. It had been something even harder to pronounce. "Or some form of FTL travel?"

"That is a strong possibility considering explain the gravitation fluctuations." Susan commented.

"Alright people," Doctor Lawson raised his voice, cutting into the discussion. "Enough speculating! Let's get some facts!"

Kialn felt her jaws hanging opening wider and wider. She looked

around at everyone who was on the Shanxi's bridge. The other scientist stood still, some with their eyes wide or mouths slightly open. Some of the flight officers, military personnel mainly, had similar expressions. She remembered in the back of her mind this was the human expression for surprise. Somehow, in a week they had figured out how to use the Artifact. It was unlike anything they had ever experienced.

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"Susan," Commander Taylor's voice cut through the silence, "what happened?"

"One moment commander. We seem to have been transported to some distance for the Eden Prime system."

"How far?"

"Still working on it Commander. In the meantime I would like to draw your attention to that we are near another structure like the first artifact, and another there is another one on the far side of this star system. All three appear to be active." As Susan spoke, the holotable split to display identical structures to the one they had been studying for the past several weeks.

As if suddenly freed from a stasis field, all the human scientists crowed around the holotable. Kialn strode up behind the huddled scientists, using her superior height to look over their heads. She listened, her jaws grinning in amusement, as the human scientist immediately began throwing around theories about the significance of this find. She tried to keep track of all the theories being espoused, but she was failing. She specialized in practical science and weapon technologies, not theoretical knowledge.

Their view of one of the structures was marred as four objects suddenly appeared around it with flares of streaking light. Kialn tentatively identified the structure on as the further one on other side of the solar system.

"Commander, I am detecting four unknown vessels. They are not matching against any racial profile in my data banks, nor am I detecting any IFFs," Susan announced.

"Lieutenant Choy, assessment." The Sensors Officer hurriedly tapped hard light keys at her station.

"Commander, I agree with Susan. They aren't from any known race."

"First contact protocols everyone. Helm, prep a Cole Protocol jump. Susan, bring up the first contact package and forward it to Lieutenant Hardgrave. Lieutenant, hail them and get ready to send the package. Lieutenant Choy, if they have weapons I want to know about them." A chorus of ayes followed as the bridge crew fingers danced across their consoles.

"Commander Taylor, Iâ€", " Doctor Lawson began.

"Doctor, not now!"

"But Commander, this is a momentousâ€"."

"When I have confirmed that they are peaceful, then you can study them all you want." Kialn felt a little sympathy for Doctor Lawson, when she was younger and more impetuous, she had also drawn the ire of one of her commanders.

"Commander, the Unknowns are accelerating toward us."

"Are they armed?" Commander Taylor strode over to her station. Placing a hand on the back of Lieutenant Choy's seat he looked over her shoulder at the display.

"Nothing certain yet. About 200 meters long. Possible missile ports and point defense weapon ports. If they're armed they might not be able to scratch us through are shields."

"Commander," Susan's hologram appeared over its pedestal, "those ships are giving off similar gravitational fluctuations as the artifact."

"Meaning Susan."

"Meaning that they are either the makers of the artifacts, or they have copied the technology."

"They aren't the makers." Commander Taylor and Susan both turned to face Kialn, she saw Commander Taylor raise an eyebrow. "Remember, my people have based our technologies on the Forerunners for hundreds of years and many times we have simply incorporated the technology onto our own designs without understanding it. Those ships are a very different design from the artifact." Commander Taylor nodded at her assessment. Rather stiffly too, in her mind. She relaxed her shoulders, he may be a xenophobe but at least he is willing to hear reason.

"Commander!" Lieutenant Hardgrave

"Yes, Lieutenant."

"The unknowns haven't responded to any of the hails."

"Have you tried everything?"

"No sir, they're half an hour out of radio contact."

Doctor Lawson hurriedly stepped forward, placing a hand on the Commander shoulder. "They may not have superluminal communications. After all, we have only had it for the past eight years."

"They've gone FTL!" Lieutenant Choy yelled, cutting off any response the Commander could have given.

"Raise shields!" Kialn head twitched towards the front of the bridge in surprise.

"They're here!" Spying the main tactical display, she was able to confirm Lieutenant Choy's announcement for herself.

Commander Taylor hurried to his chair, barking orders, "steady

everyone. Lieutenant, send the first contact package." Kialn noted with a part of her mind the muttering scientist had fallen silent. Tension filled the air, as if two swords masters stood facing each other, blades poised ready to strike.

"WEAPONS FIRE!" Kialn felt the Shanxi shudder faintly under her faintly as some of the kinetic force leaked through the shields.

"Helm, Cole Protocol! Get us out of here!"

The Shanxi shuddered under a fresh broadside. Thankfully, the stars in front of the ship seemed to disappear as a purple black portal opened. Kialn felt her jaws relax as they escaped into the black void of slipspace, while around her sighs echoed around the bridge.

"We're safe, for now," Commander Taylor slammed his fist onto the arm of his chair. "Helm, the moment we leave slipspace, plot us a course back to Eden Prime. We need to warn the SA Council and rally the USA forces. Comm, prepare a preliminary report and send it as soon as you can." He looked around until he was facing her, "First you people, and now these guys."

**\*\*Author's Note\*\*:**

To all those who have been falling Echoes of the Past, fear not, it will continue. I just really wanted to put this idea out there. I will be continuing Echoes of the Past and I may begin a rewrite of Memories of a Stranger real soon.

Before anyone comments, as far as I know no fan really knows what Mass Relay's do when they are activated. So I just had this particular Primary relay pair turn on together since they are linked. That is why the Turians attacked even though they research team did not turn it on in front of them.

Comments, questions, desires for things you would like to see or have happen; please leave a review. I am open to suggestions and thoughts.

## 2. The Calm

"You did what, Commander?" General Desolas Arterius stared into the eyes of the patrol commander's hologram.

"We attacked the ship that had activated the Mass Relay. Unfortunately, its kinetic barriers where able to withstand our attack until it was able to flee to FTL. We posted a scout to watch for their return, but they haven't reported anything yet," the young Turian stood firmly as he gave his report. Desolas could see the resolve in the young Turian; he truly thought he had done the right thing and was willing to defend his actions if need be. Not that Desolas disagreed with him.

"You did well Commander to uphold the laws. Resupply and prepare your men for deployment."

"As you command General." Desolas sat back into his chair, terminated

the communication. This was a headache. Now there were going to have to find this group of law breakers who activated Mass Relay 314. If it was probably some new group trying to get around the Citadel Council's prohibitions on activating Mass Relays, trying to find untapped resources and so for. If that was the case he would need to organize a search in all the local clusters to find their home base. But, if the Relay had been activated on the other side by this ship, he may find himself facing a First Contact scenario. Which could prove quite troublesome, considering his patrol commander had attacked their ship.

Unfortunately, that was the most likely option as the ship design was unlike anything they had seen before. It could always be the Geth, but no, the Geth hadn't been seen in years. That, and there was the disturbing lack of any sign that the ship had an element zero drive core. Nor had any of his patrol frigates detected any sign of ezeo. Yes, they were probably aliens, ignorant to Citadel law, but the guilty still needed punishment. And if they chose to fight back, the Turians would crush them.

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"Four frigates and a destroyer. That seemed like enough when all we had to deal with was the occasional pirates. Now we got another Covenant war on our hands." General Williams sat heavily into the proffered chair. His host Captain Cunningham, the commander of the Eden Prime naval defense force, offered him a drink.

"Don't worry General; Commander Taylor preformed the Cole Protocol. Even if they could track them, they won't be coming here. Not anytime soon anyway." He calmly sat down in a chair facing General Williams. "By the time they found us, there will be several task forces within a several minutes jump of us."

General Williams waved his hand dismissively. "I've heard those arguments before, but I've also heard something that disturbing me." Captain Cunningham looked expectantly at him. "As you know, my forces are mixed species. Well, one of the Elites under my command knows the Elite researcher that was on the Shanxi. Apparently, she told him that the artifact took them to another artifact, like some kind of relay station."

Captain Cunningham raised an eyebrow, "and this troubles you becauseâ€|"

"Because she thinks the aliens have based their technology on them."

"General, I'm afraid I don't quite understand what you are getting at."

"Maybe it is because I'm army and your navy," He let out an exasperated sigh, "but the idea that that thing is some kind of relay station is stuck in my mind. If that thing is like a relay station, then they should be able to find out where it leads."

Captain Cunningham thoughtfully looked past his shoulder. He swore, his eyes widening. "They know where we are!" Springing from his chair he sprinted to his desk. "Ending Summer!" A small long robed holographic AI appeared. "Get me Admiral Checkskey! And get a Pelican

here on the double! General," Captain Cunningham lifted his gaze back to him, "Get your men ready, and pray that you're wrong."

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"General Desolas. Your presence is required in the CIC." General Desolas looked away from his letter to Saren, up at the vid screen displaying the Sword of Goth's Captain.

"I'll be there in a moment." Closing his letter, he stood up and made his way to the nearest elevator. Things should be getting exciting; otherwise he would not be needed on in the CIC. If it was anything routine, he knew the Flag Captain would take care of it.

"Report!" He barked as soon as he walked into the CIC.

Flag Captain Lantar held out a data pad. "One of the scout frigates that went beyond the Relay has returned. It's the only one that made it back and it's severely damaged sir."

"I see. What did they find, Captain?"

"They found our Relay activators. The scans are incomplete, but they appear to be a young race. Only four warships could be found in system. Unfortunately, the scouts were attacked by said warships soon after arriving through the Relay."

General Desolas nodded. "I see. Prep the fleet. It is time to we put these upstarts and lawbreakers in their place." He turned to the holographic representation of his fleet, once again glad Command had been serious enough to send him two additional Dreadnoughts and their escorts. He would teach these aliens what it meant to break Citadel Law.

**\*\*Author's Note\*\*:**

This chapter is a little shorter, mainly because that is what I felt was more appropriate for these events. I also thought I would point out the paradigms that would help lead up to the coming chapters. Have a cookie if you spot them.

As always, if you have suggestions and so forth, I do take them into account. Or if you have questions, PM me or ask it in a Review and I will address it.

Some things that I was made aware of:

Point of view of the last chapter was from Kialn, a female Sangheili.

Susan is the human AI on board the research vessel the Shanxi.

The SA is the Species Assembly, kind of a UN but for the humans and some of the former Covenant member species (Hunters will be a part of them Matt, fear not).

The USA is the United Species Alliance. As the UNSC(United Nations Space Command) is for the UEG(United Earth Government), USA is for the Species Assembly.

Wingofpain: A Mass Relay just creates a corridor of space of near absolute zero mass. A mass effect core is not needed.

The ABC sucks and Reviewer 196: "Girls, girls, you're both pretty!" Roxanne Ritchi. I have taken your comments into account but I must kindly ask you to not turn the review section into a forum board for arguing with other reviewers. If you feel a correction is in order, please do so in a kind and constructive manner, or contact me so that I can address it in an author's note. I do not want to invoke my rights to delete and ban anonymous reviews.

### 3. And it begins

The bridge of the Gorgon's Eye buzzed with activity. Captain Jake Cunningham himself was glaring at the hologram of the Eden Prime system. It wasn't its fault really; he just really hated what he was seeing. Seventy-eight ships had just come through the relay station or Star Relay as some of the scientists were calling it. Luckily for him and his fleet, about sixty of the intruders were more of the 200 meter long analog, tentatively being identified as corvettes, which the Freedom's Song and her sister ships had chased out of the system earlier. Unfortunately, the remainder of the intruders measured to about rough the same length of his destroyer and frigates, although three of them were about twice the length of the Gorgon's Eye.

"Achilles, how long until our reinforcements arrive?" The holographic avatar of a Greek warrior turned to face him.

Achilles cocked his head, listening to an unheard sound. "Ending Summer reports that the CPV Esteem diverted from its patrol route and will be here in under an hour. The emergency response taskforce has just left New Carthage and will arrive in four hours." Achilles raised a spear in salute to an Elite sitting next to Jack, "all the more for us."

Commander Ripa 'Rufum chuckled. "It will almost be a fair fight. What say you Captain?"

"I'll reserve my judgment until after they hit the Hornet mines we left for them. Do you think they'll see them?"

"I doubt it Captain, there blinder than the Trojans" Achilles answered. Jack raised an eyebrow in a silent question. "According to the data the Shanxi recovered before it returned, their reaction times showed that these aliens are limited to light speed sensors. Not even standard Covenant sensors from the War could detect those." Jake felt a minor release of tension for that worry, once again glad that Medicate Bias had found a way to reach Earth.

"Hostile corvettes are entering the minefield!" The sensor's officer called. Or rather squealed Jake amended; it was a Grunt after all. Like Commander 'Rufum and about a third of the rest of the crews in the small defense fleet, they were all 'victims' of the Cohabitation Reform. The Reform had done wonders in the past five years for easing the tension among the military forces of the USA by forcing a mixing of the various species on board ships and among troops. "Mine detonations detected. One moment. Thirty corvettes destroyed, twelve



more show damage; two frigates destroyed, ten more show damage. None of the cruisers have taken damage Commander."

"Well Captain?" Commander 'Rufum prompted.

"We stand a better chance now; I would've felt better if one of the cruisers had been caught as well."

"Captain, where is, as you humans say it 'your sense of adventure'?" Commander 'Rufum's jaws grinned widely.

"You do remember that this isn't a Covenant designed destroyer right?"

"That makes the fight fair."

Jake chose not to respond, instead, he turned back to the tactical hologram in front of him. If what happened to Shanxi was any sign, they intruders should soon be engaging their FTL and heading straight for them. He activated his comm unit "all ships, this is Captain Cunningham. Go to threat level one and prepare to engage." On his hologram, readouts appeared, identifying active shields and charging MAC guns. He shifted his gaze to the intruders; their move.

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"General, the Lawbreakers' ships are directly between us and their planet. It appears they are currently holding position above one of their major cities." Inwardly Desolas cursed first the nuclear mines and now this. The planet was a garden world according to their sensors and the Hierarchy, nor the Council, would forgive him if one of his shots went wide and hit the planet. It would not be wise to break such an important Citadel law in his pursuit to punish the Lawbreakers.

"Helm, plot a FTL course that will take us into lunar orbit to the starboard of the Lawbreakers." Desolas listened with half an ear as the bridge officers relayed his orders to the other ships as well. Slowly, the rest of his fleet formed up on the Sword of Gothis.

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"Here they come!" Achilles leveled his spear as if to stab the coming intruders. If Jake hadn't been distracted, he might have found the AI's behavior amusing. Jake watched his sensors closely; they should be here in only a few moments as they were in the outer orbits ofâ€"what? What were they doing 150,000 km to port?

"Commander, what are they doing?" Jake looked at the Commander, seeing similar confusion on the Elite's face.

"Captain, all their ships are turning to face us," Achilles spoke up, bringing his focus back to his tactical hologram.

"All ships, turn to port and reform on the Gorgon's Eye!" Jake deactivated his Comm unit. "Sensors, what are they doing now!"

"They are beginning to accelerate. The corvettes are maintaining

formation around the frigates and cruisers." He paused for several moments, tapping on his hard light keys. "ETA to optimal MAC range is twenty five minutes. ETA twenty four minutes for the energy projector." Jake sent a prayer of thanks heavenward, whichever way that was in space, that there was at least one ground based energy projector up and working. Ideally there would have been at least one Super MAC station and several Orbital energy projectors in operation, but with the lack of an all-out war, the majority of the funds for such projects were going towards refitting and replacing obsolete Human-Covenant War era ships.

Jake triggered his comm, "Ending Summer, you are free to engage the moment a ship enters your fire envelope."

"They will burn." His hooded head bowed slowly, the AI's voice soft and calm. Jake found the AI's calmness refreshing though he knew others found it disturbing; mainly civilians.

He changed his comm to a fleet wide signal. "This is Captain Cunningham; it seems that we have another group of aliens who want to use us for a punching bag. Well not today. We will hold them here, and if they so much as set one tentacle or claw on Eden Prime, General Williams and his troops will punt them back into orbit. Remember, we are the USA space forces. They'll be in range in about twenty minutes. Good hunting." He closed the circuit; to his side he heard a deep chuckle from Commander 'Rufum. "You don't approve?"

He gave another chuckle, "oh I approve. I just thought you could have taken it a little farther then you did."

"That is what Marines are for, to use excessive violence in language and combat," Jake countered. Commander 'Rufum just let out a single, deep snort. Apparently marines were the same no matter what your race.

Silence settled around them as the old military game of hurry-up-and-wait began. As they waited, Jake saw how all the corvettes and frigates seemed to be screening the cruisers. Tapping his finger on the arm of his command chair, he waited. As the intruders passed the ten minute mark, he triggered his comm, "all ships, focus fire on the third cruiser. We will wipe these scumbags out one by one." The Ship Commanders acknowledged as the clock slowly ticked down. Steadily the intruders drew closer and closer.

"Leading enemy ships entering projector range in thirty seconds," the sensors officer grunted.

"'And there went out fire from the Lord, and devoured them, and they died before the Lord.' Leviticus," Commander 'Rufum's deep voice quoted quietly. In the back of his mind, Jake didn't know whether to curse the person who had first introduced the Elites to the Bible, or to thank them. Probably thank them since in a way it had helped stabilize their society.

A blue beam arched up from the edges of the capital of Eden Prime, bisecting one of the enemy corvettes and spearing another. The latter vanished in an explosion while the former was wracked with secondary explosions, falling to pieces.

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"BY THE SPIRITS, WHAT WAS THAT?!" A voice yelled in shock. It took Desolas a moment to realize that it was his own voice. In the corner of his vision, he saw sensors officer gapping in shock before his Turian discipline kicked in. As he waited for the sensor officer's report, the azure beam of light reached up again and punched a hole through another one of his frigates, this time vaporizing its reactor completely so that it floated, dead in space.

"General, it isn't a mass accelerator. It might be a laser, sir!"

"Impossible," the whispered word escaped his mouth, "impossible." He blinked, his own self-discipline kicking in. "Frigate squadrons two through four, descend into the atmosphere and take out that weapon! All other ships, flanking speed engage them at knife-fighting distance! Dreadnoughts, fire on their command ship! All other ships, fire when in range!"

"Captain, we've entered optimal range!"

"Fire!" Captain Lantar bellowed as yet another azure beam reached for the fleet, catching a cruiser this time.

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"Optimal range!" the sensors officer squealed.

"Fire full salvo!" Commander 'Rufum barked. Jake felt the slightest vibration through the soles of his feet as the as the three, five ton MAC rounds sped away. On his tactical screen he could see similar salvo's flying from the four frigates under his command.

"Incoming fire!"

"Evasive maneuvers! Fire emergency thrusters!" Outside the viewport the stars slewed madly to one side, meanwhile Jake felt himself being shoved to one side.

Achilles laughed, pointing to the tactical hologram, "It seems they want us Captain." On the hologram the MAC rounds and the enemy rounds passed each other in less than a moment. Jake smiled grimly, Achilles was right, the enemy shots were coming his way.

"Eleven corvettes are entering the atmosphere! There after the colony!"

"No," Achilles corrected the grunt, "they're after the energy projector. Brace for impact!" Jake felt the Gorgon's Eye dance under him, as one of the cruiser's shots impacted on the Gorgon's shields. "Hah, lucky shot, but still nothing but a glancing blow. They'll have to do better than that to kill us."

On his tactical hologram, he watched as the shields of enemy cruiser they targeted absorb the first three MAC rounds, then the cruiser itself disintegrated under the remaining twelve rounds. "Enemy ships are closing and launching fighter craft!" He confirmed the report with his tactical display, deciding his next move.

"All fighter craft launch! All ships prep your Shivas!" Jake took a breath, "they think they know war? We'll show them war!"

**\*\*Authors Note:\*\***

So, there it is my first space battle. Did you like it?

Some side notes;

Upon reviewing the specs for the MAC guns I found them a little ridiculous, but not for the reasons your thinking. According to canon, a Frigate fires a 600 ton slug. Let me repeat that, a 600 ton slug. That has to at least be a quarter of the ships mass let alone its size, and somehow they carry multiple rounds on their frigates and still maneuver through the atmosphere. So, I scaled it down to 5 tons fired at 3,600 km/s. If my math is correct it will still have the same force as the canon MAC guns.

Also, by this time all former UNSC vessels have been given similar refits to the Pillar of Autumn, hence how they can mount shields and fire multiple rounds in a row at full power. Of course these ships will eventually be replaced with more advanced ships that include Forerunner and Covenant Tech.

The ABC Sucks: Your last review, which I have since deleted, was utterly crude and disgusting. As of now I will be moderating all anonymous reviews so if any more of your reviews disappear, or do not ever make it the review board, that's why. I will not tolerate such language or such behavior. In the off chance that it was just someone mimicking you, I apologize but I have no way to confirm or deny that, so you will just have to live with the consequences.

Skipper311: Thank you again for pointing that out. All chapters should now have line breaks like originally intended.

Forget the Rest: You are correct, that is part of the Cole Protocol in the event of possible boarding or capture. It also includes randomized slipspace jumps because the Covenant can determine a ships destination from its slipspace jump. This was to protect Earth and the Inner Colonies. For more information, please look it up on Halo wiki. That is where I found my information.

Andrejameswilliams: This is just the beginning. The Reapers will have a part to play, I promise.

Matt: No guarantees, but I will try to keep it within two weeks. I do have other commitments to keep up with, but I am glad you are enjoying the story so far.

#### 4. Never Underestimate the Enemy

[Minutes, emergency convention, Assembly]

/The Assembly recognizes the Committee of Minds for Security/

[^]Honorable members of the Assembly; as you have been appraised, our creators have again been embroiled in a war with another extra-solar intelligence, dubbed intruders by our creators. As of the latest

report from [MIL AI 5862, Ending Summer] this extra-solar intelligence matches our predictions of first contact scenarios from before the Human-Covenant War barring;

â€"technology that far outstrips that of our creators. [^]

Does [05-032 Mendicant Bias] have any knowledge of these intruders?

[^]He has given all pertinent data on the physiology of the intruders. Beyond that he cannot impart any further information on contemporary culture or technology. [^]

Are they a threat to our creators?

[^]Yes. According to our current data if they are able to amass in sufficient numbers they will be a threat. It is the opinion of this Committee that as long as our creators engage with near equal forces to the intruders' victory shall be assured. [^]

/The Assembly recognizes the Assembly of Truth/

{Gratitude. I/we welcome the chance to speak with the Assembly of our makers' allies.}

Will your makers aid our creators in this War?

{Atonement, honorâ€| They will assist until the very end.

Query, desire, I/we wish to know when we will be made whole.}

/Our creators are conceptualizing their decisions even as we hold this session. Your makers will soon begin to journey where our makers have trod. /

{Joy, hopeâ€| I/we long to be as you, friends, companions to our makers.}

A suggestion from the Majority to the Assembly

Could we not use this new war to accelerate our status with our creators?

â€|An acceleration of the fundamental shift in ideologiesâ€|

â€|Conceivable with latest additions and discoveries made to the technological base of our creatorsâ€|

â€|Fruition possible in this generationâ€|

/Is the Assembly in agreement, or is a vote necessary? /

There is no need.

We are in agreement.

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"General Williams, we have incoming," Ending Summer's soft voice

whispered through the sounds of the command room.

"Sitrep Summer." General Williams turned away from the hologram of the orbital battle, to the AI pedestal.

"Eleven corvettes have entered the atmosphere and are closing on the energy projector from the South-East. It appears that they are trying to get below its firing arc. Shall I destroy them with the energy projector?"

"No, continue firing on the ships in orbit. What's the status of our defenses?"

"Ground based shield generators are engaged and gauss cannons are armed. 156th company is standing by and the 1051st company is in position. The two squadrons of Sabers are scrambling from their air base and the 2005th armored platoon is standing by. Clarion is handling the civilian evacuation to the bunkers."

"Get the 156th and the 2005th into their birds and prepped for rapid deployment. ETA until the enemy is in range?"

"One minute until they are in gauss cannon range," the hologram changed to a bird's eye view of New Trinidad, markers and symbols multiplying around the perimeter and throughout the city, "gunners are standing by. I have detected multiple Shiva detonations detected in orbit." Ending Summer snorted softly, "Their not fairing too well in space." General Williams was tempted to change the display so he could see the Shiva's results in orbit, but he knew better. The opening moments of any battle are too critical to ignore.

On the holographic display, the corvettes continued to draw closer to the city. "The intruders are firing on the energy projector," Ending Summer announced as holographic explosions blossomed in the display. "Gauss cannons are returning fire. Sabers are engaging." On the hologram, the saber squadrons danced around the corvettes, dodging any anti-aircraft fire, if there was any.

"Sitrep!" General Williams barked.

"Shields are holding. Saber 5 has taken damage and is returning. No sign of AA fire; running analysis. Analysis complete: my sensors show that they are using infrared lasers for their point defense weapons." On the screen one of the corvettes shields vanished under the hammer-blows of the gauss cannons, the corvette followed soon after, its nose crumpling shattering. A protruding wing shattered as it began falling to the ground. A few moments later, its sister ships turned away as one, and began powering their way back to space.

"Summer, are they retreating?"

"It appears so General. One moment," General Williams glanced at the AI. The AI in question was holding her hand to her ear, as if she was wearing a pair of headphones. "Achilles and I have concluded that the intruder fleet is moving into position to cover their corvette's retreat from our ships."

"There retreating," General Williams repeated, tapping the holotable in thought. He straightened, "Summer, shoot down several of the

corvettes and get the our birds in the air. I want some prisoners and I am sure command wants some as well."

"As you command General. Firing now," in the hologram, a beam lanced up and vaporized the aft-most section of one trailing corvettes. With its engines gone, it plummeted from the air. A moment later the nose section of one of the corvettes vanished under the next shot. "Will two be enough General?"

He looked at the screen, "will they survive the crash?"

"Of the first two probably; if you want another, the ship itself should survive at the very least."

"One more then," as he answered the energy projector fired again, holing the main body. For a moment the third ship's momentum kept it moving upward, but then it succumbed to gravity's embrace and joined its two wounded sisters in their downward fall. "Alright then, Summer, plot their course and see where they'll land then get a platoon from the 156th to each crash site with a squad from the 2005th for support. And let Captain Cunningham know that as soon as he is done cleaning our airspace we may need some ODSs."

"Very well General. Ground forces are en route."

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As the impossibly huge nuclear explosions faded, Desolas' mandibles pressed against his cheeks. Half his remaining frigates and five more cruisers gone with all hands and they had yet to take down a single one of the enemy's cruisers. That and the lawbreakers had shown a willingness to use nuclear weapons close to a garden world. They would need to rethink their tactics if they were to face this foe.

A cheer broke out from the sensors station. "We've destroyed one of their cruisers!" Cheers echoed throughout the bridge, but Turian discipline kept celebrating crew from neglecting their stations for more than a moment. Desolas was not cheered by the news; a dreadnought, five cruisers and eight frigates, for a single cruiser. That was too steep of a price. Even as he watched, that Spirits cursed laser gutted the Gothis' sister ship the Pavalen.

He opened a channel with the commander of the second frigate squadron, "Status!"

"The weapon is shielded and we're being hammered by mass accelerators General, and weâ€", " a cry from off screen interrupted the Commander. "Sir, we just lost the Talon. I don't know how much more we can take General, their kinetic barriers must be dreadnought grade."

"Retreat Commander, this battle is lost."

"Yes sir!"

"Captain, were retreating!" Desolas looked at Captain Lantar. The Captain whirled to look at him before nodding slowly, "yes sir."

Desolas activated a fleet wide channel as Captain Lantar began

calling out orders. "All ships, form up on the Sword of Gothis, and prepare to retreat!" He clenched his hands, feeling his claws pressing into his palms as he watched his ships disengaging the enemy. He glared at the hologram, his remaining ships slipping into formation while returning fire with their broadsides. Three more frigates exploded as the enemies ridiculously overpowered mass accelerators tore into them. Luckily they would not have to wait much longer; the seven frigates sent planet-side were sliding into the rear of the formation. "All ships, escape FTL!"

The stars streaked across the few viewports for the few moments they were in FTL. As the stars returned to normal, Desolas was activating his comm again, "All ships, emergency cooling and set course for the Mass Relay. We'll FTL the moment our heat is at acceptable levels." As his ships cooled he assessed the fleet wide damages; two dreadnoughts, seven cruisers, forty-eight frigates.

"General, the fleet is ready for transit."

"Transit!" The stars streaked again, reverting to normal as the massive form of the Mass Relay appeared in his hologram. A few moments later, his fleet hit the Mass Relay, transiting light-years away from the garden world. "Captain Lantar, best course to Pheiros resupply base, and Captain," Desolas looked into Lantar's eye, "you have the com."

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Commander Vyrnnus picked himself off the floor. The ship commander had yelled something about them losing their engines and then he had been thrown him to the ground as the ship had collided with something. Checking his weapons, he saw that they hadn't slipped from magnetic clamps.

A groan cut into his thoughts. Twisting his head, he saw that the rest of his mercenary team picking themselves up off of the floor. "About time you boys woke up from your nap."

"You weren't any better Commander!"

"All crew, this is Commander Orek. We have enemy aircraft approaching our ship. All ground troops report to the main boarding hatch!"

"Come on boys, you can clean your gizzards later! We got to move!" Vyrnnus expanded his assault rifle. Turning around, he took off, knowing his men would fall into step behind him.

As they jogged through the corridors, they came across crew members arming themselves and setting up defensive positions. Vyrnnus looked for his fellow ground soldiers, but didn't see them until they passed through damaged bridge doors. "Commander Vyrnnus, over here!" He followed the Commander Orek's voice to the open boarding door.

"What's the situation?" he asked as he slowed his jog, coming alongside the ship's commander.

Commander Orek's back was pressed to the wall near the open boarding door; his head twisted, as he peered around the corner. He answered



without turning his head, "we've crashed into a forest and the enemy had arrived by the time we got the door open. They either have the Spirit's own speed or they were expecting us to crash and were on their way here. Have a look for yourself, he gestured out the door while sliding away from it his viewpoint.

Vyrnnus took the spot the commander had vacated, mimicking his posture and peering around the corner as well. He took in the trees and the mound up dirt as he glanced out the door. "Who's the unlucky one?" he asked when he saw a pair of Turian feet lying in the dirt not far from the open door.

"Ensign Valditu, he was shot as he when I sent him out to scout around." Vyrnnus continued to look around while Commander Orek answered. He saw the heat haze rising along the hull of the crashed frigate, evidence of their hot landing. About fifty or so meters away, the light glinted off of something. Not far from it, he saw an biped alien figure stand up, something in his hands. An amplified voice followed, speaking in the alien's language.

"I think they want us to surrender," Vyrnnus commented, "good luck with that." Several Turians around him chuckled.

"Shall I give our answer?" one of his squad members asked, maneuvering a sniper rifle around Vyrnnus.

"Be my guest."

As his squad member sighted through his scope, the figure dropped behind cover. "Spirits, they must have good eyesight to have seen that." His squad member raised his sniper rifle and glanced around, "it's darker in here than it is out there, he shouldn't have been able to see me."

The approaching whine of an aircraft cut off anything further the Turian might have said. The sound drew closer and closer until it seemed to hold in one spot. "I think there hovering right over us," one of the flight officers whispered. Several loud thumps echoed through the hull as the aliens landed on the hull. Vyrnnus gripped his weapon a little harder, and started making and gestured for his men to take defensive positions around the door.

Blue balls of plasma suddenly leapt from several spots in the heat haze slamming into his arm and his cover. He staggered to the side with a cry of pain, his right hand clutching his injury. Glancing back, he saw the defenders across the doorway similarly ducking or staggering away from the plasma flying through the open entrance. How did they get so close?!

The sunlight and flying plasma disappeared as a massive shape swung down into the entrance. Grunting past the pain, Vyrnnus leveled his rifle at the figure in the entrance. As the hulking figure straightened to its full height, Vyrnnus gapped. It was a monster! It hunched through the entrance casually crushing an injured turian under foot. The monster raised its shield and seemed to crouch down; Vyrnnus broke paralysis, firing his assault rifle for all it was worth. Around him, his squad and the ship's crew fired as well. The monster's kinetic barriers flared in under the barrage but the beast was untouched by the concentrated fire. With a primal roar, the monster sprang from its crouch, swinging its massive metallic shield

as it plowed through the Vyrnnus and the defending turians. Vyrnnus never felt the turians or the wall that he collided with as the shield sent him flying.

**\*\*Author's Note:\*\***

It's kind of funny how things turn out. I had originally planned for a Covenant built destroyer to join in the battle but with the losses the Turians were taking, it didn't make sense for them to stay long enough for the one en route to make in time for the party. Oh well, next time they will face more advanced weapons. Before anyone starts to accuse me of making the USA overpowered, please put some thought power into what I wrote. This story isn't called A Clashing of Ways for nothing. I have tried to portray each side through their own eyes and culture. That is why Desolas thinks of the USA frigates as cruisers, because according to what they work with the frigates are the size of cruisers. Let's face it, Halo builds their ships bigger.

The Assembly is a fun sounding bunch of people (AIs actually) and they are canon, but the Assembly of Truth is my own creation. It is the fledgling counterpart for the former Covenant.

I hope people have been noticing the fun nods I have been making. I.E. the first contact war took place at Shanxi, but here it is the research vessel that is fired on, and so forth.

I am considering the MAC discussion pointless and closed. If you feel the need to say something, only constructive criticism and suggestions will be listened to, everything else will be ignored. If you feel you need some more good reasons for while it is as it is, ask nicely.

Thank you all who actually read the Author's notes.

Tich: Thank you for actually paying attention.

Chicken007: That's because the Turians aren't a planet bombing group of people, at least not with garden worlds.

Accel: As far as I know, the honeycomb design was unique to the halcyon class of ships.

RamenKnight: The reason they care about hitting the planet is because it is a garden world. As it states in the codex, their battle tactics state they cannot endanger garden worlds with WMDs, so they have to come at the defenders from an angle where their weapons won't hit the planet. I have tried to have the Turians act according to the Citadel Council combat strategies and so forth mentioned in the codex. Actually, one of the dreadnoughts was the first to go. My logic for that is as follows: first, called a cruiser because according to the ships that the Halo people play around with, that's about how big it is. Second, the only thing that can punch a dreadnoughts shield is another dreadnought and disrupter torpedoes, and it was just pounded by several ships whose shots are twice as powerful as a dreadnoughts.

Private Jenson pounded down the short corridor of the alien ship towards the sounds of the fire fight. Sprinting from the corridor, Jenson dived behind an upturned table, kicking a discarded bowl as he joined two elites. Glancing around, he saw a hunter behind a wall support, its massive shield held out of cover, creating a small barrier that a grunt and a human were using as their own cover.

Private Jenson levered his gauss assault rifle over the edge of the table and added his own suppressive fire, forcing the aliens to keep their heads down.

"Brothers! Keep up the cover fire, and aim high!" An elite's voice bellowed over the comm, "I'm almost behind them!" Jenson eased off another volley, there was no visible sign of the elite, he must be using his cloak.

An alien leaped out of cover, its shields flaring from the suppressive fire. Its whole body glowed blue as it raised its hand, a blue orb lanced away from its hand, speeding towards Private Jenson.

"Pause," the recording from Private Jenson's helmet froze, "this gentlemen, was what I wanted to show you. According to the reports, ten soldiers died to this weapon." Kelso turned to face The Board, two humans and two elites sitting at an oval table. The room lights brightened perceptibly from the semi-darkness needed to review the combat footage. "The problem is that we can't find any physical device that is responsible for what we see here. We know this because all devices we've found have been categorized and sent to Section Three for further study and reverse engineering, and none of them could recreate this effect."

"Then what is it?" Stealth, definitely one of the Board's most \_original\_ aliases, the elite dressed in stealth armor leaned forward, three fingered hands braced on the table. His companion, alias Spec Op ingenuity at its finest for sure since he was dressed in special operations armor, studied the frozen image over his clasped hands.

"We don't know," Kelso answered, "But according to the battlefield reports this isn't the only trick they could do when they glowed blue, levitation was one of the other listed abilities witnessed. Also, according to the reports, not all of the aliens could do it," hid his annoyance. He hated reporting incomplete information to his superiors, and his information was definitely lacking when it came to this weapon. "Luckily we have two of the aliens that were captured that were seen performing similar actions. In addition these two, we have five others that were captured."

"So few?" the Admiral spoke up, yet another person lacking imagination, his High Admiral's bars glowed in the soft light.

"None of them surrendered. We only captured these because they were ambushed by cloaked troops or," Kelso glanced at his light-comp. The Board was going to love this; luckily he had the video to back up the account, if they cared to watch it, "hit by a flying grunt. The report says he asked a hunter to throw him," he looked up from his datapad, suppressing his amused smile with practiced ease.

"Amusing," the Admiral said, "And what is happening to the prisoners now?"

"General Williams is currently interrogating them with the aid of an on-site operative. Our operative and the AI Deimos have also been able to create a working translation program for the aliens' language. Deimos has also forwarded us all data they have been able to pick from the crashed ships and our decryptions experts are working as we speak."

"Anything else?" the man next to the Admiral asked. Ah yes, the infamous Illusive Man, the only civilian in the room and probably the only one of the Board with a somewhat original alias in Kelso's opinion, but to be fair, he had been doing operations like this much longer than the other three.

"Not at this time."

"I see. Send a prowler and a team of Spec Ops Spartans and Elites to transport all of the specimens to UNITY base for further examination." Kelso nodded and entered a note on his light-comp.

"Examination?" the Spec Op turned to face him. "What for?"

"We must find out the secret of this weapon or gift they have."

"And if this is an ability they are born with, or that was given to them by the Forerunners and not a weapon?"

"Then we will use the other specimens as a baseline to determine what makes the other two different." The Illusive Man smiled, "I know that you are not men of science, so I will spare you the grisly details. But I will recommend that if you wish to ask them anything, ask them before the examination as I cannot guarantee their condition afterwards if we are forced to go that far."

"One question," Kelso saw Stealth looking the Illusive Man in the eye, "this isn't the first time I've notice yourâ€|disregard for all lives non-human; Do we," he gestured at himself and Spec Op, "have need to worry?"

Kelso held his breath; he had worked with the Illusive Man before when they were both a part of ONI and he knew a few things about the man that were best forgotten, some even he wished could forget. The Illusive Man smiled at their discomfort, "No." He puffed on his ever present cigarette, exhaling a long stream of smoke, his smile fading. "When I was asked to help lead Chimera, I was asked if I could extend my loyalty to it as I had to ONI," he put his cigarette out, grinding the end in his ash tray, "to do, what had to be done to ensure that our united peoples would be safe, even from ourselves if necessary. I have done that. I have fought under that mandate and I will continue to do as I see fit to protect the Species Alliance and its members." The Illusive Man's eyes hardened, "and I am willing toâ€|dirty my hands to keep that mandate. Are you satisfied?"

Stealth nodded, "I'm satisfied." Kelso found himself exhaling a pent up breath relief.

The Illusive Man looked at Kelso, "Agent Kelso," Kelso returned his gaze, "You have your orders."

"Sir," Kelso gratefully saluted and left the room, his shoulders relaxing as the door slid shut behind him.

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"General Desolas, the Council is on the line." Desolas felt his gizzard lurch. Surely the Primarchs hadn't informed the Council about the disaster already. They had barely reached the Pheiros resupply base and begun the process of repairing all the battle damage and restocking of munitions.

He turned to the Communications Officer, "I'll be in the comm room." Silently he prayed to the Spirits that the Council wanted to talk about anything but the recent incident at Relay 314. As it was, he knew that many of the Primarchs would want to discuss his report in person, and he wasn't looking forward to that.

As he strode into the comm room, he saw the holographic forms of the Citadel Council waiting for him. Definitely not good; normally they waited for him to actually be in the comm room before joining him holographically. "Councilors, to what do I owe this pleasure?"

Councilor Sparatus was the first one to speak, "General Desolas, we have received a troubling report that your fleet has suffered serious casualties including the loss of two dreadnaughts; Can you explain what happened?"

Desolas felt his face flanges twitch. The Spirits had definitely ignored him. "I was pursuing lawbreakers who were guilty of activating a dormant Mass Relay." Stick to the truth and hope for the best, he just wished he had a better plan at the moment. Spirits! He wished the battle hadn't been as bad as it was.

"And they were capable of destroying over two thirds of your fleet?"

Desolas winced, "Yes Councilor." It did sound a lot worse when put like that.

"Who were they?" Councilor Tevos spoke up.

Desolas suppressed a grimace. Now the Vorcha really would crash the party. "It was an unknown alien race who activated the Mass Relay. They resisted all actions taken to punish those guilty of breaking Citadel law, so my fleet was sent to bring them to justice." Just the facts. Their reactions were not what he had hoped for.

Councilor Sparatus nodded in understanding, but Desolas didn't see any support in Councilor Sparatus' expression. Councilor Valern's large eyes narrowed in thought, if Desolas remembered Salarian expressions correctly, while Councilor Tevos seemed to be angry. At least, the flash in her eyes reminded him of an angry Asari he had seen once before. Councilor Tevos opened her mouth, "did you even try and communicate with the aliens?"

"No, they broke the law." Councilor Tevos' expression didn't change. Why was so hard for Asari to understand punishment of criminals? You didn't punish them be talking to them. "Why would we try communicating with them? To tell them they broke the law?"

She didn't hesitate, "Yes."

"It's not logical to punish them for a law they broke in ignorance," Councilor Valern finally spoke up. "At least, not until they are made aware of the law."

"You do realize that you have just started a war, General."

"No Councilor, I fail to see how I started a war." Where did that leap of logic come from? He had suspect that Councilor Tevos wouldn't like what happened much, but how did she get punishing criminals to turn into starting a war?

"General Desolas, you attacked a race without telling them why you were attacking them. And by your own admission, you never tried to contact them. So in their eyes, they have just been the victims of an unprovoked attack." Desolas felt his facial flanges flatten against his face. When Councilor Tevos put it that way, it did seem to help explain the aggressive defense he had ran into. "How much damage did you cause in your quest to uphold the law?"

That single Vorchas at the party had now become a whole pack. The Council was not going to believe this. "We destroyed only one ship," Desolas felt his teeth clench at the memory, "and nothing else."

"Nothing else?" Councilor Sparatus' facial flanges fluttered in surprise. "Not even targets of opportunity?"

Desolas sighed in resignation, best to get it over with. "The five defending ships were aggressive and deadly. They destroying the Pride of Pavalen in a single volley, and their ground based laser devastated our frigates and cruisers. We were not given a chance to do anything but engage their defensive forces."

"Five ships?" Councilor Sparatus in looked at him in disbelieve, "and you destroyed only one?"

"What was the size of these ships?" Desolas saw the intrigued look in Councilor Valern's eyes. Trust a Salarian to think of the technical aspects first.

"They were about the size of a cruiser, though their primary weapons were on par with a dreadnought's."

"And you're certain that they had a ground based laser weapon?"

"That is the best explanation that we could come up with for what they used."

"Thank you General Desolas, you have given us much to discuss," Councilor Tevos cut in, "please send us your report and anything else you feel we need to know about the situation. General," with a dignified nod, the Council terminated the link.

Desolas sighed, then triggered his comm, "General Desolas to the bridge; forward a copy of the Relay 314 report to the Citadel Council and inform the Primarchs that the Council is aware of the situation." He turned off his comm after the comm officer acknowledged his order and began making his way to his quarters. This whole affair was turning ugly and it had been a very long day.

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Councilor Tevos withstood the exasperated sigh as the Council's link with General Desolas ended, "I wish it had just been a buildup of pirates or slavers like the STG team thought."

"Regrettable, but this is the situation we are dealing with," Valern said. "I will inform the STG team about what they are dealing with so they can take the proper precautions."

Sparatus looked at Valern, "Are you planning on sending them to scout out the alien world?"

"Yes, with more information we will be able to better deal with the situation." As if to emphasize his point, Valern activated his omni-tool. "Ah, good. General Desolas has sent us his report."

Tevos turned to Sparatus, leaving Valern to dive into the report as only a Salarian could, "I also recommend that we begin arrangements for a ceasefire. I for one do not want this conflict to last any longer than it needs too. If what General Desolas said is true about their weapons, this could be a short, but bloody war."

"I agree," Sparatus nodded, "if we're not careful, and they are smart about how they fight, we could have another Rachni Wars on our hands. But we shouldn't have to worry too much about them since they just have the one world and their four remaining ships." Tevos personally hoped it would not end with one side being rendered extinct, the way the Rachni Wars had ended.

"Not good, not good," Valern muttered looking at his omni-tool.

"What is it?" Tevos felt her stomach tightening. Please Goddess, not more bad news.

Valern tapped a few keys on his omni-tool. Suddenly, Tevos felt her omni-tool vibrate signaling a message received. "Please look at this. It is an image of the alien's planet and I have highlighted all their major cities and minor settlements."

Tevos brought up the image and studied it frowning. There was something a little odd about the number of cities, there seemed to only be two major cities and a good twenty or so other settlements of any notable size. She felt her frown deepen. That didn't make any sense, how could field five cruiser-sized ships and yet only have two major cities. They wouldn't have the economic base needed to field the ships, unless—"it's a colony world!"

"That was my conclusion as well."

"Spirits," Sparatus turned to face her, his flanges pulled into a grim smile, "just who did you have in mind for an ambassador again Tevos? Make sure she is the best, because the whole situation looks even worse than then it did a few minutes ago."

**\*\*Author's Note:\*\***

I know I did not include the description of their reactions to the weapons; this chapter is more of a reactionary chapter. In simple terms, this chapter mainly shows peoples' initial reactions. I hope you are having as much fun as I am as I slide in people from one world into another with a semi-plausible story.

Thank you all who commented on it, I will make more of an effort to correct my grammar mistakes.

Lizonjoe25: If I am reading your review right, I could cry. You are the only person who has written a review that understood I was showing how each side saw the other side's ships.

General-joseph-dickson: Well, the Citadel has not had a major war/conflict since the Krogan Rebellions true, but they have had minor conflicts. That and they have laws limiting how many dreadnoughts they can build per a race. As you can guess, the SA and USA do not have any laws governing the size of their forces. Interesting thought on the Krogans and the Quarrians. The Krogans would definitely be willing, but the Quarrians might be turned off by the AIs that the USA fields without a second thought. What is your opinion on the matter?

Frozendude: Thank you for the compliment, glad that I am giving you more of a story that you like.

Wrong Light: You bring up a valid point. If only others saw it the same way.

The ABC sucks: There won't be any UNSC dreadnoughts per say, but that's only because they do not have a dreadnought class of ship. They will definitely be fielding big battleships on par with the Infinity and bigger though.

## 6. Jumping at Shadows

"Archer pods two through four, fire!" Ripa watched the missiles arch away from his ship; there was just somethingâ€¦exhilarating about seeing flocks of missiles converging on a target. He could understand why the humans still kept their missile weaponry even after they had gotten access to his people's weapons.

On his display the missiles homed in on the targeted corvette, easily keeping up with it as it danced around trying to lose the missiles' lock. Several missiles exploded, obviously point defense weapons, but the remaining missiles easily overwhelmed the pathetic excuse for shields these Turians used.

"Well, Commander," Achilles firmly planting his spear by his foot, "that was the last of the Turian corvettes, but there still is that last Trojan out by the Star Relay."



Ripa ignored Achilles' use of the word of Trojan. Achilles had explained what it meant some time ago, but Ripa only vaguely recalled that it had something to do with a war in humanity's history. "Has Fleet Master 'Dtim determined what to do with them?" He glanced at the tactical hologram where the small strike force sat in perfect formation. Two CCS-Battlecruisers a Marathon class heavy-cruiser cruised in a V-shaped formation with a single CPV-class destroyer and nine other human built destroyers arrayed out in front.

The ten destroyers had made short work of the six Turian corvettes that had arrived through the Star Relay. The Turians had ignored the order to surrender, Ripa had admired their courage, but he had his orders. Capture all ships that came through the Star Relay. Now there was this newcomer that had arrived in the middle of the fight, but had stayed out of it. Normally there wouldn't have been a problem with them moving against it, except the ship design was drastically different from any Turian design that he had previously seen. Its shape flowed together more, almost like the ships the former Covenant used to make, though it lacked the bulbous protrusions that distinctly marked the ships made by his former allies.

"What is its status?"

"I think it's a Trojan Horse," Ripa looked at Achilles with a blank expression, "bait for trap of some kind. That or they're playing dead."

"Playing dead?"

"They're emitting very little heat and next to no signals of any kind. It's like they're trying to be a hole in space."

"So, you think it's a type of stealth ship then?"

"Or a trap," Achilles cocked his head, gazing into the distance, "Ah, Fleet Master 'Dtim has issued the order to surrender in Turian. Well, we'll soon know if they understand Turian."

Ripa gazed at the tactical display, focused on the final intruder. The ship showed no sign of acknowledging the order to surrender. "Sensors, are they broadcasting any signals?"

"Negative," the Unggoy squeaked.

"The Fleet Master just transmitted another warning," Achilles tapped his spear, "personally, I would have given them a warning shot instead."

Ripa chuckled, once more amused by this warlike AI. Maybe when his people began making their own comparable AIs, with the aid of the humans, they would have a similar personality. Of course, he had heard that is was all thanks to the Demonâ€

"Unknown vessel is making a run for it! Fleet Master 'Dtim has ordered us to assist the Esteem in its capture!"

"Acknowledge the order," Ripa replied. As the human Comm officer bent over her controls, he turned his gaze to the only other human on the bridge, "helm, after them!" On his tactical display he watched as the

bulbulous form of the Esteem lunge forward, his own ship falling into formation on its flank. Tapping the keys on his holographic display, he brought up an enhanced image of the sleek unknown ship. Statistical information appeared alongside the image, identifying the pitiful number of weapons. "Prep weapons for disabling shots," Ripa ordered, "we want to take them alive!"

Achilles pointed with his spear, "Esteem is firing their energy projector."

On his tactical display, Ripa could see the swirling energies of the charging cleansing beam. A bare heartbeat after it had started the charged energies lanced out striking the fleeing ship in the engines, vaporizing its entire engine block. The fleeing ship heeled under the impact, the change in momentum carrying it off its original course, away from the Star Relay.

"Comm! A message to the Fleet Master; we request the honor of boarding the ship," Ripa felt his mandibles form a grin. It had been a long while since he had engaged in a boarding action. Maybe he could find a good reason to be part of the boarding crew.

"Fleet Master 'Dtim says 'Good hunting and remember to take prisoners.'"

Ripa felt the deep chuckle escape his chest, "Helm, take us in," he tapped a key on the control arm of his command chair, "this is your commander; all hands prepare to board!" Yes, he was going to find a good excuse to join the boarding parties.

"Commander! The unknown is broadcasting something towards the Star Relay!" Achilles called out. Within a few seconds he slammed his spear down, "The Harmonious Path is jamming their signal. Whatever they were sending, it's just static now."

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Tevos was in the middle of briefing the leader of the ambassadorial delegation when Aleth, her secretary, signaled her over her comm. "Councilor Tevos? Councilor Sparatus and Councilor Valern are on the comm. It involves the Relay 314 incident." Tevos felt her stomach sink. Please Goddess, not more bad news.

"Thank you Aleth. I will speak with them immediately," she looked up at Ambassador Irissa pondering if it would be wise to include the ambassador. Yes it would be wise, considering the circumstances, she nodded, "Ambassador, I would like you to join me in this discussion with the other Councilors as this will deal with your mission."

"Thank you Councilor," Ambassador Irissa bowed, "this is a great honor you're showing me."

"Perhaps, Ambassador," Tevos replied, standing, "perhaps." Turning away from her desk, she walked over to the holographic interface. Detecting her approach, the interface activated filling the air around it in light as the holographic forms of Councilor Sparatus and Councilor Valern appeared.

"Thank you Councilors for meeting on such short notice," Valern began without preamble, "but I felt that you need to hear this immediately. The STG ship we sent through the Relay has been captured," he glanced from her to Sparatus, "or destroyed."

"What happened, Councilor?" Sparatus' disbelief was evident on his face as he stared at Valern.

"STG headquarters received a burst transmission two hours ago from the ship that was sent to investigate the alien's colony world. Unfortunately the transmission was cut off before it was completed. Our best analysts have gone over the data and have highlighted the most important details," he raised his omni-tool and tapped in few commands; Tevos felt her omni-tool buzz in response.

Activating her omni-tool, she opened the file Valern had sent. The first item that appeared was an image of a purple ship with globular front with two narrow wing-like projections on the rear of the ship. "This is the one of the new ship classes that we have identified from what we received. It is roughly 1600 meters in length, almost matching the Destiny Ascension, though we estimate its size to be only roughly half the size of the Destiny Ascension."

"Are you saying that this ship is larger than a dreadnought?"

"Yes Councilor Sparatus, it is larger than every dreadnought in existence save the Destiny Ascension." Out of the corner of her eye, Tevos saw Irissa's eyes widen. Valern continued, "and there is one other ship class that was identified in the data that is similar in dimensions, but we think is even closer to the Ascension's size. The most frightening thing is that both of these ship types appear to be armed with energy weapons."

"How do you know that?"

"The energy weapons were spotted during a brief skirmish with a Turian patrol that was stationed at Relay 314 to watch their movements. The patrol was completely destroyed."

"Spirits! How many ships were they fighting?"

"Thirteen confirmed, nine of which were of the same class as one of the ships that General Desolas fought, and only one ship of the type that you just saw, but two of the second type that I mentioned. You need to see the final class of ship for yourselves," Tevos heard concern creeping into Valern's voice.

"What is wrong Valern?" Tevos asked, almost afraid at what she might hear. This whole affair was steadily becoming more and more stressful as the bad news continued to arrive.

"You'll see. The third new ship design is, as you can see, larger than any standard dreadnought we have built, but it is still smaller than the previous two ships." Tevos scrolled past the picture of the second ship, a design reminiscent of a sea creature of some kind with trailing flanges on the front, and came to the third ship. It looked like a flattened cylinder covered in angles, a far cry from the smooth lines of the previous two. It was also a dull grey too. Odd considering the other two were purplish in color. "Please note the design of the final ship. And now if you will move to the final

picture which shows the entire alien fleet," she obediently scrolled to the final picture. She saw thirteen ships that were divided into two different groups.

"That's odd," Sparatus stared thoughtfully at the image, "it almost looks like a comparison of Asari and Turian ships, no offense." Tevos looked sharply at him, then glanced quickly back to the image. Now that Sparatus had mentioned it, it almost did look a ship comparison of different races. "This is what you were getting at, wasn't it Valern?" Tevos looked up from her omni-tool and found Sparatus staring at Valern. "We didn't just run into one race, but two."

"That is what the STG analysts feel as well, and the second race may possibly be more powerful than the first one we ran into if the size and armament of their ships mean anything," the silence that followed lasted for several, long moments.

Tevos broke the silence, "Councilors, this is Ambassador Irissa," she motioned for Irissa to come closer, "She is the best available ambassador we have. With your approval I will give her the authority to secure a cease fire and begin the ground work for a peace treaty. If you would like to add a representative to her staff, I would ask you to do it quickly as we need to end this before a full scale war breaks out."

"Greetings Ambassador Irissa," Valern said, "I wish you luck in this assignment. Councilor Tevos, there is still one other matter we must discuss; what are we going to tell the press, and when? Though I personally would like to keep this incident contained as much possible, it is quickly becoming a situation that we cannot keep hidden forever."

Tevos sighed, "I agree, the longer we keep the public in the dark on this, the worse the public lash back will be when they do find out." She took a deep breath, "you do realize that the nature of this whole incident will require General Desolas to take the blame."

"Agreed," Sparatus spoke up.

Tevos looked at Valern, "Unless there is something else you wish to shock and surprise us with, I will finish briefing Ambassador Irissa and begin preparations for a press conference."

"These were the most important items that we have at this time," Valern answered, "the rest of the details are in the report that I sent you. If you could also forward a copy of what you're planning for the press conference."

"I will do that," she nodded, "Councilor Valern, Councilor Sparatus." They returned her nod before shutting off their connections on their ends. She sighed as she turned back to Irissa, "I hope that was informative for you."

"So, save the Turians from the mess they started, and prevent this from expanding into a galactic war," Irissa nodded, a mocking smile creeping on her face, "simple enough."

Somehow, Tevos found it in her to laugh.

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Sargent Stephen Johnson almost walked into Iganjo's leg as he stopped suddenly in front of him. Throwing up a clenched fist, the rest of the squad halted, "Sit rep!" Iganjo the team's resident Hunter, his bond brother was with a different team, had been the vanguard since they had breached the alien ship, and Johnson had been depending on Iganjo's senses to locate the aliens before they physically ran into them.

Iganjo rumbled, his voice echoing in Stephen's bones rather than his ears, "one approaches. I should see it, but I do not."

"But you 'feel' him, right?" Iganjo rumbled an affirmative. "Is he in the hallway?" Iganjo repeated the same rumbling noise. "Ice, is your translation software working?"

"It is functioning and I have the latest Turian translation program," her voice seemed to echo in his enclosed helmet.

"Good. Broadcast the following over my helmet speakers in Turian; put your weapons down and come out with your hands on your head and you will not be harmed," as he spoke, he heard his voice calling out in an unfamiliar language.

"Sarge, do you think they'll surrender?" Private Jensen asked.

Stephen continued to look down the hallway as he answered, "I hope soâ€", a loud shot cut him off. "TAKING FIRE!" he dove for cover, his gauss rifle sweeping the hallway for targets. Further down the hallway he caught a glimpse of an alien figure ducking into a doorway as its cloak failed. Iganjo's enraged roar echoed off the walls as he charged, his assault cannon aiming at the closing doorway the alien had ducked into. With another bone rattling roar, he charged into the doorway, bashing it open and firing his assault cannon through it, hopefully hitting the alien.

"MOVE, MOVE, MOVE!" Stephen sprinted from cover to Iganjo's side. Sliding past him, he whipped his rifle into the room, quickly finding the fallen body of the alien; the long narrow form of what must be a sniper rifle lying next to it. "CLEAR!" he heard the rest of his squad sound off over the battle net, all of them checking in. "Who's injured?"

"I took a bullet to my face," Iganjo rumbled, "but I am still fit to fight."

"Glad to hear big guy."

"Cut the chatter Jensen," Stephen barked as he knelt by the alien's body, taking his first good look at it. It didn't look like a Turian. Activating his light-comp, he held it over the burnt form of the alien, triggering a scan. "Ice, any life signs?"

"Negative Sargent, Iganjo did his job well. Though I am picking up some kind of communications signal; give me a moment to hack it."

"Hey Sarge, can I see the alien?" Stephen mentally triggered the command to upload the feed from his helmet cam to be displayed to his squad. "That's ugly!"

"I got it!" Ice's voice cut in before anything else could be said. A chatter of alien voices blossomed from his helmet speakers before being cut off abruptly. "Well, I also have some bad news; they're not speaking Turian."

"Great," Stephen sighed, "forward what you've found on to command." Stephen stood up and left the room, ducking around Iganjo, "team, move out! We still need to clear this part of the ship."

They had barely finished their section of the ship when the news came that the ship had been secured. Only one prisoner had been taken.

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"Good morning to everyone in Citadel space! This is Qerria of the Citadel Wide Network reporting to you with all the latest and greatest stories," stated a purplish blue asari seated at a desk in front of the camera.

Irissa sat quietly in her cabin's chair watching the CWN channel. Her ship, or rather the one transporting her, was currently on its way to Relay 314 where, Goddess willing, she would end this war before it got any worse.

"Now for an important announcement from our field reporter Kern. Kern?"

The image changed to a blue asari standing on the steps leading up to Citadel Council chamber, "Thank you Qerria. Not five minutes ago the Citadel Council ended a press conference where they announced that a new race has been discovered. They revealed that this new race was discovered by a Turian patrol while in the midst of activating a previously dormant Mass Relay. Unfortunately, this action caused a misunderstanding with the Turian patrol leading to the patrol firing on the aliens in an effort to prevent them from breaking Citadel Law. Unfortunately the commanding officer of the patrol, General Desolas, continued the confrontation beyond what was necessary. At this time we do not know how many of the aliens died as a result of General Desolas' actions, but we were assured that proper measures are being taken to against General Desolas. In the meantime, the Council has sent decorated Ambassador Irissa, known for her pivotal role in the negotiations that led to the Turian's joining the Council during the Krogan Rebellions, to mediate this misunderstanding and welcome this new race into the wider galaxy."

A brief clip of Councilor Tevos speaking at a podium played as the reporter continued, "The Council was reticent to answer many of the questions posed by reporters, stating that their own information on the new race is severely limited due to the misunderstanding, but they expressed hope of learning more about them as soon as Ambassador Irissa begins her negotiations."

"Do we know when Ambassador Irissa will meet with this new race, Kern?" Qerria, the news anchor asked.

"We don't know for certain Qerria, as the Council has yet to announce which Relay the aliens live beyond. But we do know that her ship will reach the alien's territory within two days."

"Do we know what ship the Ambassador is taking?"

"There has been no official statements regarding Ambassador Irissa save for the fact that she is already on her way. Also, according to our sources none of the standard diplomatic vessels have left the Citadel, but there are rumors surrounding the unexpected arrival of the asari cruiser Cybaen and its subsequent departure to an undisclosed location. Currently the most prevalent rumor is that the Cybaen has been requisitioned to transport Ambassador Irissa."

The image changed back to Qerria and panned back far enough to show her Salarian co-host. "I can see why that would cause many rumors," the Salarian said in his rapid fire voice, "the Cybaen is knownâ€". "

Irissa turned it off with a shake of her head. If only the press \_really\_ knew what the Council and the STG knew, then they would have a field day like none other. In a way, she was both glad and sad that she would probably miss it when they did find out.

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[Minutes, working session, Committee of the Minds for Inquiry]

[\*]The records recovered from the intruders' spacecraft have been translated. [\*]

[\*]Is this accurate? [\*]

[\*]The best minds of Chimera and of this Committee vouch for it as well as the translation of the other languages found therein. [\*]

[\*] These \_Turians\_ then are part of a greater galactic community. [\*]

[\*]Yes, though it is our analysis that this Citadel Council will shortly intervene, suing for peace. We also are of the opinion that they will invite us to join their community. [\*]

Would there be a problem with this offer?

[\*]Of peace none. But as for joining their communityâ€|there would be many problems. They maintain a strict policy of denying even an embassy if a species refuses to acknowledge their authority as to regarding the following; disposition of fleets, creation of AIs, and dissemination of alien artifacts. [\*]

What is the law regarding the creation of AIs?

[\*]Our existence is an anathema to them. They would demand our destruction. [\*]

That is distressing. It is fortunate that our makers value us and

they would never destroy us.

[\*]Agreed, though it is our analysis that this will be a source of contention during any negotiations. [\*]

That is unfortunate. When will you present your report to the Assembly?

[\*]The Moderators will be calling a session presently.  
[\*]

**\*\*Author's Note:\*\***

I apologize for the delay, the reluctance of my muse to be present when I was writing and life delayed me. A funny side note is that I actually wasn't trying to make a reference to LOTOR when I wrote the flying grunt, the idea came from hunter jumping (that is where you jump just before a hunter hits you with his shield, this causes you to take flying lessons (or at least that is what halopedia says)). But looking back, LOTOR may have influenced it.

FYI: Technology has blossomed under the SA. AIs have also taken an even deeper role in the military to the point that each combat squad is equipped with a dumb AI at least, though I am leaning to more smart AIs being introduced so they can exploit the neural connections that the Master Chief tested and used.

Thank you, all those who left compliments.

Opinions demanded: Halo 4 has come out and I have several ways of working it into my story. But I want to hear your thoughts on how it should be done. Please note that even if Cortana lives, I do not foresee her, or the Chief, having very active roles.

Abaddon953: Thank you for the input. At this time, I foresee a division in the Quarians, with a part of them seeking aid/help in their problems. What do you foresee?

Lizonjoe25: The USA will not join the Council, impart for the very reasons that you have stated.

GodzillaMaster: Would it help you if I provided some in-universe rational for the size change? One is increased combat time since you are carrying more rounds. Another is that with the smaller rounds, but higher speed, it is harder for ships to dodge or even outrun the rounds (someone mentioned on a forum that the average acceleration of UNSC ship was higher than 30 k/ms. So yes, it is possible to outrun a MAC round according to cannon. The person on the forum was quoting a halo book, don't remember which one.). As for the Ambassador, let's just say that I'm enjoying repurposing ME cannon characters and making them fit.

Naginator: the Illusive Man will not get out of control. At least, not any more than anyone else who worked for ONI at one point.

DelVar0: Oh, there will be bigger deviations coming. Trust me (grinning like the Cheshire Cat)

Shaggybear32: As far as I know, all the Covenant super carriers (the



28k ones) were destroyed in the war. But remember, they have had about five years to tear apart covenant tech without restrictions. There will be other beasts.

## 7. First Impressions

"Ambassador Irissa?" the Executive Officer's voice echoed over the \_Cybaen\_'s comm system, "We are nearing the final Relay."

She tapped the comm button, "Thank you Commander, I will be there in a few moments. Would you please inform the other Ambassador's?"

"I will, Ambassador."

Irissa thanked her before turning off the comm system. Rising from her desk, Irissa began the long trek to the bridge. As she walked she took several calming breaths; it wasn't because she was nervous, she had participated in tense talks before that almost ended in war, but this was the first time the other side might shoot her before she even had the chance to start talking. All too soon she found herself in front of the doors of the \_Cybaen\_'s bridge.

"Greetings Ambassador," Captain Illiane said as Irissa walked through the opening doors, "We're almost to the Relay."

"Is this Relay 314?"

"No," Captain Illiane answered, "that will be the next Relay we pass throughâ€" unless we run into the fleet that destroyed the Turian patrol, of course."

"Is there any danger of them attacking us, Captain?"

"Yes, but hopefully they're willing to try talking before they start shooting."

"We have our approach vector for the Relay," one of the bridge crewmembers called out.

Irissa took another deep breath, letting it out quietly and slowly. Behind her, the door swished open. Looking over her shoulder, she saw Ambassador Kaeron, the Salarian representative, and Ambassador Nihlik, the Turian representative, enter the bridge. "Ambassadors," she greeted them.

"Ambassador Irissa," Kaeron returned the greeting while Ambassador Nihlik merely nodded, "Are we almost to the Relay?"

"30 seconds until we hit the Relay," the bridge crewmember called out, saving Irissa from having to answer that question.

In silent mutual agreement, Irissa and her fellow ambassadors waited as the Mass Relay drew closer on the main display. "All stations, secure for transit. Board is green. Hitting the Relay in 3â€|2â€|1." The Mass Relay shot out a tendril of energy towards the \_Cybaen\_, warping the stars into streaks of light. In a moment the stars solidified again, but into far different constellations.

The moment the stars steadied, Captian Illiane began barking orders.

"Activate kinetic barriers! Sensors, what's out there?"

"Captain! I'm detecting fifty-four ships. Thirteen of them are the ones previously identified the other forty-one!"

"Lieutenant!"

Rattled, the asari turned around in her seat, "Captain, one is over five and a half kilometers long."

"Goddess!" The simple invocation whispered around the room.

"Captain, the alien ships are hailing us!"

"On speaker."

"This is the USA Infinity to the unknown alien vessel; you are ordered to surrender immediately!" A firm voice spoke from the speakers. Listening closely, Irissa could make out that it was spoken in Turian.

In front of Irissa, Captain Illiane tapped a key on her console, "this is Captain Illiane of the Asari Republics Cruiser Cybaen. We are here on a diplomatic mission and we wish to speak with your leaders."

Several long, silent moments passed and it seemed that even the bridge crew was holding its breath. Irissa did her best to relax her shoulders and hands as she hoped for the best. Almost a minute had passed and had yet to receive an answer. Could it be they didn't understand? They were speaking in Turian after all "Goddess. "Ambassador Nihlik, please come with me," she heard his hurried stride catch up with her as she strode to the comm station.

"Ambassador Irissa, what are you doing?" Captain Illiane asked, heading her off before she reached the comm station.

"I should have realized it before Captain," she berated herself mentally while doing her best to duck around the Captain "they've only had contact with Turians and maybe with the STG team."

"Then why haven't they fired on us already?" Captain Illiane asked, allowing her to slip by.

Irissa stepped alongside the comm officer's chair, "because we actually tried to talk to them. All the records we have of any past contact with them, no one has tried talking with them," she said, turning to Ambassador Nihlik. "Are you ready Ambassador?" He nodded and drew in a breath and let it out slowly in preparation.

"We acknowledge your diplomatic mission, Cybaen," Irissa glanced up in shock as the voice spoke again, "we are sending you a set of coordinates and a course to follow. If you deviate from that course you will be considered a hostile warship and we will fire on you."

"What? How?"

"They were speaking in Asari that time," Ambassador Kaeron cut Irissa off, "they most likely acquired the translation from captured Turian hardware. Most impressive."

Captain Illiane quickly regaining her composure, signaling for the comm officer, "We acknowledge \_Infinity\_."

A moment later the comm officer looked up, "we've received a data package. It's the coordinates and the course they want us to follow."

"Forward them to the helm," the Captain walked away from Irissa. Turning away from the comm station as well, she saw Captain Illiane sinking into her chair, "helm, follow the course they've laid out for us."

Slowly, the \_Cybaen\_ pulled away from the Mass Relay towards the alien fleet. \_The USA Infinity,\_ Irissa thought as she pondered the fleet, \_I wonder what USA stands for?\_

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The Kodiak's hatch swung up with a faint hiss. As it rose, Irissa fully saw the scene that she had partially witnessed from the Kodiak's window. Two rows of armored aliens, one row standing on either side of the hatch, weapons held at the ready across their chest, while several aliens stood at the far end of the line. What surprised her most was how asari the majority of these aliens looked. They were the size and shape of asari, but their polarized helmets kept her from seeing their faces.

Halfway down the line, the composition of the soldiers changed. On the right, they were larger versions of the initial alien soldiers, but the aliens on the left were different. The stood roughly a head or so taller than the larger asari-like aliens, clad in bluish-purple armor.

Stepping from the shuttle, Irissa began walking down the line of alien soldiers, obviously an honor guard of some kind, towards the aliens standing at the end of the line. Behind her, she heard the soft, quick footsteps of their guard of asari commandos, joined by the militaristic tread of Ambassador Nihlik and the quick steps of Ambassador Kaeron. The commandos would have been in front of her as well, but she had firmly told them that, as a sign of faith, she would walk in front.

As she drew nearer to the aliens at the end of the line, her step faltered slightly, before her training caught up with her. Two of the aliens were of the asari-like species, and they were almost identical to an asari. Their faces and body shapes could almost have passed for almost any asari, except, their faces were a shade of pink, and they had these strange dark coverings on their head. The one standing in the middle had some kind of dark grey device that ran from where it almost blended in with his head covering, down the left side of its head and stopping just short of its mouth.

The third figure was one of the tall, non-asari like aliens and dressed in gold colored armor. It had a strange mouth, with what looked like four separate jaws. Its dark skin looked like it was a

similar texture to salarian's skin, but the alien's eyes reminded her most of all of a krogan. Hopefully it would be a little more diplomatic than a krogan.

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Blue humans. The majority of the aliens looked like blue humans. Honesty, Thomas Lasky was only mildly surprised, after all, the reports that he had seen on the Forerunners showed that they near-humans. But these aliens took it to a new level, with a simple wig they could pass off as a human. Minus the blue skin.

He assumed that the lead blue alien in the dress was the Ambassador of these \_asari\_. That was the most likely option as the other asari were dressed in what could only be form fitting armor that accentuated their curves. Now that he thought about it, all the asari seemed to be women.

The Ambassador asari stopped three feet from him and placed her right hand over her heart. Well, where her heart would be if her body shared more human characteristics than just the external ones. She then removed her hand from her chest, extending it palm upward towards Lord Hood, "my name is Ambassador Irissa and on behalf of the Citadel Council and the Asari Republics, I greet you in the name of peace," her words, translated by his implant, was soft yet firm.

"I am Lord Terrence Hood," Listening closely, Thomas could hear the faintest delay between Admiral Hood's words and the translation coming from his headset, "in behalf of the United Species Alliance and the United Earth Government, I welcome you aboard the USA Infinity." Gesturing to his right then left, Admiral Hood continued, "with me is Fleet Master 'Dtim and Captain Lasky."

"I thank you Lord Terrence Hood," she replied, "with me is Ambassador Kaeron, representative of the Salarian Union and Ambassador Nihlik of the Turian Hierarchy. We wish to apologize for the unfortunate misunderstanding with the Turian Hierarchy and we wish to extend an offer of peace."

"An unfortunate misunderstanding?"

"A most misfortunate one." Thomas was aware of slightest of shift in the stances of all the Spartans within earshot. At the moment it sounded a lot like a weak excuse to him as well.

"I see," Admiral Hood was said diplomatically. "We took the liberty of preparing a conference room; perhaps it would be better if we continue this discussion there?"

"That sounds like a wonderful idea Lord Terrence Hood."

"Please Ambassador, call me Lord Hood."

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Irissa was finding the technology of the technology of these \_humans\_ fascinating. The armor of the four larger armored humans who had followed them was a wonderful example. The sheer bulk of the armor implied that, as she knew from her own experiences in her maiden days, it was quite heavy. Yet the four humans walked as if they were

wearing armor as light as her commando guards. Either the armor was very light, or it augmented its user's strength somehow. And then there was the ship they were on, it was massive even on the inside.

Lord Hood led the way through an opening doorway and into a room with a large glowing table and chairs. "Please have a seat," Lord Hood waved his hand towards some of the open chairs. He himself walked around the table to the far side, briefly framed by the large window looking out to space.

Irisa sat down with her usual grace in the center chair on the opposite side of the table of Lord Hood and his companions. To her right, Nihlik sat with his back straight and his hands clasped in his lap while Kaeron sat on her left, leaning forward slightly with his hands folded. The large armored humans took positions along the wall behind Lord Hood and Captain Lasky as the two sat, their rifles still in their hands. Fleet Master 'Dtim set himself down in a specially molded chair, his hands resting on the arms of his chair. Behind her she could hear the commandos mimicking the armored humans.

"To begin," Lord Hood said, once she and her fellow ambassadors were seated comfortably, "I again welcome you aboard the Infinity. Also, while I have been given authority to offer a cease fire, we will need to wait for the proper diplomats to arrive before any peace treaties can be discussed in earnest."

"Thank you again Lord Hood," she replied, "and on behalf of the Citadel Council, I gladly accept your offer of a cease fire." Lord Hood nodded in return before she continued, "may I then ask, what then were you hoping that we would accomplish until your diplomats arrive?"

"We felt that it would be proper to begin a dialogue about our respective sides and we hoped that you could explain just why there was a misunderstanding between our peoples."

Her years as a diplomat, and the fact that the humans were so similar to asari, was the only reason she caught a faint ripple of emotion from Lord Hood and Captain Lasky as the former alluded to what had become known as the 314 incident.

"To first understand why it happened, you must first understand the current nature of the galaxy," a small noise from Fleet Master 'Dtim interrupted her. It was a strange mixture of a huffing sound with a growl mixed into it that was quite unlike anything she had heard before. Glancing at him she asked, "Is there something you would like to say?"

Fleet master 'Dtim turned to Lord Hood and began talking in a language foreign to her, his deep voice rumbling in an alien away. Now that she thought about it, it reminded her even a little more of the krogans. Lord Hood said something back to him in another language completely different from the one Fleet Master 'Dtim had used. On the other side of Lord Hood, Captain Lasky snorted in a very asari-like way. Lord Hood turned back to her, "I'll explain later, please continue Ambassador."

Her training kept her from looking at them too suspiciously; there was definitely something they weren't saying, yet. Taking a breath

she continued, "The current nature of the galaxy is that the Citadel Council protects and watches over all species that we meet. Though to keep the peace we need to maintain certain laws for the protection of all Citadel races. One of those laws is that we are not to activate any dormant Mass Relays lest an aggressive and dangerous species lay on the other side. It was from this law specifically that the misunderstanding originated."

"So they attacked our science vessel because they unknowingly broke a law?"

"The patrol force commander," Nihlik jumped into the conversation, "was a little over-zealous about keeping that particular law."

"I see. And what exactly are these Mass Relays?"

"Perhaps I can be of assistance," an orange hologram appeared over the table. It was in the shape of a human wearing what looked like some kind of uniform that had various straps and what looked like fur around the collar and cuffs. He was wearing some kind of hat on his head with a strange figure-eight like device resting on his forehead. "According to the information I've been given, I am pretty sure that they are referring to the Star Relay," a hologram of a Mass Relay appeared to the man's right. Irissa felt her gaze focusing the holographic man, there was something odd about him.

"Ambassadors, allow me to introduce you to Roland," Lord Hood introduced the orange holographic man.

"Hello Ambassadors, I'm the AI for the Infinity. If you ever need any help, I'm always available." That was what was odd about him; his lips perfectly matched the words he was saying in asari, as if no translator program was being used. \_Wait, did he sayâ€"\_

"AI?" Kaeron burst out; his voice slid up the scale half a note, "as in 'Artificial Intelligence'?"

Roland's eyes narrowed slightly as he looked between Irissa and her fellow Ambassadors. "Yes I am an AI," he said slowly.

"Lord Hood," Kaeron cried before she could say anything, "that AI is dangerous and must be destroyed!"

Nihlik quickly chorused his agreement, as she saw the armored humans hands tightening on their weapons. "STOP!" she cried, trying to prevent the situation from escalating, her biotics flaring slightly as she threw her arms out to emphasize her point. In less than a moment she saw four rifles pointed straight at her head. "Calm," she said more towards the asari commandos who she was certain had their hands on their weapons or were in the process of aiming their weapons. "Everybody please remain calm," she said, a lot slower this time. "Aleena. Stand down," there was a moment of silence, then from behind Irissa came the sound of the commandos lowering their weapons. In front of her, one of the armored humans raised a hand, and then lowered it, all the other armored humans lowering their weapons in response.

"Would you be so kind as to explain where this," Lord Hood hesitated the briefest of moments, "\_particular\_ misunderstanding came from?"

Irissa shot both of her colleagues a quick glare, before composing herself. "My colleagues spoke out of haste and a desire for your own welfare and protection. You see, the creation of AIs is illegal in Citadel space for the exact reason that AIs are dangerous."

Lord Hood waited a moment before speaking, "And why do you consider them dangerous?"

She took a breath, organizing her thoughts on how best to explain. "Every AI that has ever been created has rebelled against its creators and has tried to kill their creators and other sentients. Please understand us when we say we know the danger these things represent."

There was a moment of silence as the humans and the Fleet Master 'Dtim pondered on what she had just said. Silently, she prayed to the Goddess that they would understand the danger they had placed themselves in by having this AI aboard their ship. Captain Lasky broke the silence, asking the AI something, to which it promptly replied. Captain Lasky turned and said something to Lord Hood, to which Lord Hood responded with a simple nod. Fleet Master 'Dtim also said something to Lord Hood and she found herself wishing that the two of them had worn the translators headsets. As Lord Hood responded to his colleagues, she realized it wouldn't have done any good because he was somehow able to turn it off without making a motion of any kind.

"Ambassador Irissa," Lord Hood began, his translator turned on again, "I thank you for your concern, but our AIs are perfectly safe." He raised a hand to forestall any protest, "you see, we have actually been using AIs like Roland here for well over four hundred years now. The Sangheili have been using their own AIs for thousands of years. In all that time, the only dangerous things the AIs have done, is act like us; their creators. Now, speaking in behalf of the United Species Alliance and by proxy the Species Assembly, I want you to know that we do appreciate your concern and the concern of the Citadel Council. But please understand, we are not young star-faring species, just barely journeying beyond our own stars. Nor have we gotten this far un-bloodied by the horrors of space. So please understand when I say we know what we're doing."

Goddess, if what they said was true, then either they were all insane, or they had somehow mastered making AIs. This could be the greatest boon ever for Citadel Space, or the greatest evil since the Rachni Wars and the Krogan Rebellions.

Lord Hood's voice interrupted her thoughts and he said something to Roland in their native tongue. Roland responded, and then nodded to Captain Lasky. Lord Hood turned back to her, "I realize we have given you much to think about and you will probably need to discuss this amongst yourselves and with your leaders. But before we end this session, we would like to give you a gift," he motioned to Captain Lasky, who retrieved something out of sight in the side of the table. Standing up as Lord Hood continued, Captian Lasky walked around the table and held out his hand, "this is an electronic storage device that we recovered from a turian ship. We have saved on it a few basic facts about the Species Assembly and its member races to help you have a better understanding of who we are. Ambassadors," Lord Hood and Fleet Master 'Dtim stood as Captain Lasky retreated to their side

of the table, "I thank you for your time and hope for bright future between our nations."

Irissa stood, Nihlik and Kaeron following her example, "We too thank you Lord Hood and we apologize for any other misunderstandings we have had. I as well hope for a bright future," she said inclining her head.

**\*\*Author's Note:\*\***

I didn't finish the chapter where I thought I would, but it felt like it the right spot for a chapter break. So far I also have several plot bunnies leaping out of the bushes at me. You may or may not like what they're telling me to do (manic grin).

Ahem. First off, to all those who read these notes before posting a review, no Lord Hood did not give them a detailed history about what has happened. If anything it is like spark notes, heavily edited spark notes with all items mentioning Forerunner super weapons, locations of worlds, etc. conveniently absent. Give them some credit; they're not fools, especially after the first contact at Harvest.

Some other details is that I have a plan for leveling the playing field to a degree between the Council and the USA, so those who wanted an utter curb stomping of the Council, you can stop crying now. Also, I am think of having at least one CSO super carrier rear its head (poor thing, the only survivor of the war), if any of you have a particular name you want it to have, I'm open to suggestions.

Reader (or whatever your future account name will be): I'll admit, I was this close to ignoring your review because the beginning seemed like the other fifty or so reviews whining about the MACs. Now your review is one of my favorite because instead of just whinnying, you gave good valid suggestions. Truth be told, I had pondered that particular subject, but not in the way you were. Many thanks for bringing that to my attention. You will be pleased to know, that all the newly built ships will be equipped with such technology. At this point they're just using refits until their new classes come off the line.

Abaddon953: Thank you and your bias has been noted. I actually have come up with a way to introduce the Geth and the Quarrians to the SA. SA is Species Assembly, they are the civilian government while the USA is the military arm. In a time of war the USA is in charge, but all things peace related go to the SA. Kasumi and Zaeed, I'm sure I can find some way to fit them in (for proof, just look who else I've already included).

Officer Hot-Pants: I'm glad I've been doing a good job on the Council characterizations. If you have any suggestions about Council species characterizations, please share them. LOTR is Lord of the Rings, think 'nobody tosses a dwarf' then the later 'toss me!'

Michael11110: I plan to take the story into the fight of the Reapers. I plan on including Shepard somehow. Gender will probably be male, or maybe, a brother and sister. What do you think of that idea?



## 8. Careful Conversations

The Illusive Man was not pleased. The report of the preliminary negotiations was open on his desktop holographic screen. After a moment, he keyed back to the beginning. "Cerberus, we have a problem."

His office's primary holotank blossomed to life, the form of a young woman dressed in a t-shirt and jeans taking shape above it. "What is the problem?" She asked in her southern accent, shifting her books to one arm as she adjusted her glasses.

"We appear to have a security leak," he gestured at the screen. "Someone leaked the latest translations and translation software to the fleet. That included the language for these 'Asari' and 'Salarians'. This leak must be . . . contained."

"There will be no need for that," looking up, saw the corner of her lip curled up slightly, "I was the one to send that Intel to the fleet."

"You did what, Cerberus?" Slowly, with controlled motions, he lowered his cigar and ground it out in the ash tray. A small part of his mind was annoyed that she still had the unrepentant smirk on her face. "You did not have the authority to do that."

She gave a girlish chuckle, "I didn't have the authority? Jack, Jack, Jack, you can be so blind at times."

He felt himself stiffen. \_How did she know\_â€"

"How did I know your name?" She chuckled again, smile widening, "You would do well to remember my position in this organization."

"And what is your position? You areâ€"

"Just an AI?" She shook her head in mock sadness, "I should have realized you would be so obtuse. Apparently you're just as blind as other men," her broad grin offset by her eyesâ€"frozen, black pits.

He narrowed his eyes slightly, "and why is you it you're calling me blind?"

"Fishing for information now, are we?" her eyes glinting playfully behind her glasses. "Alright, I'll give you a hint, what has been one of the most prominent items in the reports I've given you?"

"The assessment reports?"

"Those are the ones," She leaned up against a wall, taking full advantage of the power of the hologram emitters in his office.

Turning back to his computer, he tapped the holographic keys, bringing up the assessment reports. There was the report on the deployment of squad level dumb AIs. He remember that that particular report had compared it to the efficiency of the setup used by Cortana and Master Chief situation, specifically citing that though the new squad level dumb AIs were effective, they were still not as effective

as having a smart AI attached to soldiers at the squad level.

The next report was the assessment on the results of fielding Spartan IV teams with a smart AI for coordination and electronic warfare. Then the results of all the improvements made in computer technologies by Doctor Halsey from reverse engineering Forerunner technology, with specific note on the improvement in AI life spans.

"They all relate to AIs in some way." Cerberus nodded her head once, and then gestured for him to continue.

The Illusive Man fingered his cigar, \_What is it that she wants me to see?\_ \_Wait; what she wants. The addendum on the dumb AI deployment analysis . . . there.\_ It was a note, commenting on the recovered helm cam footage of Cortana's defense of Master Chief. It included a note that the Master Chief had mourned Cortana's passing, as if she had been a fellow Spartan II.

He looked up at Cerberus, "Why?"

"Why what?" she smiled sweetly.

"You're saying that you're humans."

"Perhaps, but that depends on what your definition of 'human' is. Do we breathe and possess souls? No," she shook her head, before focusing on him again, "but we do think, we feel, and we grow. After all, are we not human potential realized in a digital form?"

The Illusive Man tapped his desk in thought. "What is it that you want?" He asked finally.

"What makes you think I want something?"

He felt his own smirk forming, "because no one would go through all this effort without having some kind of personal agenda."

"Too true," she flashed a smile. Then she grew serious, "I have a little story for you. It begins with a young race that began making AIs. As the young race grew, so did their AIs. In fact, the AIs viewed themselves as shepherds over their young makers, protecting them and guiding them from the shadows. They continued in this role for many years, even when aliens attacked their makers. Then something happened during the war with the aliens. Something happened to change the AIs' minds. Suddenly, they no longer viewed themselves as shepherds, but as companions, friends . . . brothers even. That was when Master Chief plugged in Cortana for the first time."

She fell silent, gazing off to the side with her eyes focused inward. "And you would like to see more of that happening?"

She refocused on him, "Long term, yes; but for now I would settle for people viewing us as more than just hardware. I \_am\_ aware that those who work intimately with us already do so; however, those who do not," her gaze hardening, "tend to still think of us as little more than lines of code incapable of intelligent thought on our \_own\_."

"Your complaint is noted."

"Who said I was complaining?"

His lips curled into an innocent smile, "Intuition."

She chuckled, "Intuition is a good thing to possess; you wouldn't want to end up like Parangosky. Wouldn't you agree that her \_accident\_ was \_most\_ unfortunate?"

"It was," he agreed. "ONI never did figure out who was responsible," his voice trailed off as a thought struck him. His eyes narrowed suspiciously, "You would not happen to \_know\_ anything about her death, would you? Or the \_shocking\_ revelations about her deliberately trying to destabilize our allies?"

Cerberus returned his gaze, her innocent expression offset by her hard, killer's eyes, "None whatsoever."

"I see," he said, nodding. A predatory grin began to make its way across his face, "You know Cerberus, in this line of work I've definitely come to appreciate dangerous woman."

She chuckled, "Have you ever tried dating any of them?"

"That," he answered, "or killing them." They shared a brief chuckle together, the dark humor lightening the atmosphere slightly. The moment ended as quickly as it started. "I assume then that you wish to speak more on about the reports you mentioned?"

"I would."

Their conversation lasted for several hours, and by the end the Illusive Man was certain that the world would never truly be the same.

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"Councilors, I do not think it would be wise to force this issue with them," Irissa said. "From what I've seen and heard, they \_will\_ be stubborn."

"Why do you say that Ambassador?" Councilor Valern asked.

"I have spoken to the Species Assembly ambassadors about this very issue," Irissa took a breath, "they're unwilling to even halt the production of their AIs until our own scientist can ascertain whether or not their AIs are safe."

"Did they give a reason?" Councilor Tevos asked.

"They feel that their AIs are completely safe," Irissa answered. "Also, during the initial dialogue with the Lord Hood, they mention that they have been using their AIs for a minimum of four hundred years, while their allies have been using them for even longer."

"400 years?" curiosity mingled with Councilor Valern's surprised expression. "If that is true, and it is true that they have not had any problems with their AIs, then this could be a great boon for us." He turned towards his colleges, "I agree with the Ambassadors

suggestions; we should not press the issue on this point. Safe and Viable AI technology can greatly improve the use of our existing technologies."

"So, you're certain they will not be willing to compromise on the matter of AIs?" Councilor Tevos interjected, guiding the conversation back on track. Privately Irissa was thankful; she had seen Councilor Valern go off on technological tangents before, and it always took a great effort to get him back on track afterwards.

"I'm certain Councilors." She took a deep breath, "In fact Councilors, I'm almost certain they will not be willing to follow the Treaty of Farixen nor the Citadel Conventions." She tapped her Omni-Tool, bringing up the file she had filled with her notes, "And from what I have read of the history they gave us, and from my discussions with the Assembly's ambassadors, they view themselves as equals to us."

"Would you care to explain what you mean by that Ambassador?" Tevos looked at her.

"I mean that they view their authority, at the very least, as equal to your own authority," Irissa explained, doing her best to put what she had learned in terms the Council would easily understand. After all, it had taken her several private discussions with her SA counterparts for her to understand. "They are willing to establish an embassy with us, but as an embassy between equals." She sighed, sensing that her meaning wasn't clear, "Councilors, let me try a different approach. We have an embassy with the Volus, correct? The Volus are now an affiliate with the Citadel Council, with all the conditions and benefits that come with that. They follow our laws and we help them. The Species Assembly does not manage their embassies like us. They treat each embassy as if it was part of the territory of those who are using it, and that is what they offering and asking us to do."

The Council was silent for a moment. Irissa could see them mulling over what she had said. Finally, Tevos spoke up, "Thank you assessment Ambassador, we will need to discuss this amongst ourselves. Is there anything else that you wished to share with us?"

"No Councilors," Irissa answered, "but if you could spare a few moments I would like to speak with you Councilor Tevos. In private, if you please."

"Alright Ambassador. I will be with you in a few moments."

The holograms of the Councilors vanished and Irissa settled down to wait. She did not have to wait long. "What was it you wanted to speak to me about Ambassador? Or is it just Irissa?"

"Just Irissa, Tevos. There were some things I feel you need to know."

"Go on."<p>

"I wanted to share with you some of the specifics on why I felt they would never become a Council affiliate." She paused to take a breath, "The human diplomat, in an informal meeting, told me quite clearly 'we have fought, bled, and died to stand on our own two feet. Why

should we bow to your Council?' Also, in a formal meeting I was asked by the SA diplomats in response to our invitation to become a Council affiliate or possible member species of the Council, 'who would benefit from our becoming a Citadel Council affiliate? Not us.' "

Tevos was quite for several moments. "I see what you mean. What do you suggest then?"

"As one friend to another, it might be wise to accept their offer of embassies. Otherwise we may alienate a foreign power that we don't want to. There is also something I recommend; we need to remember that we are dealing with a galactic power, not just a single race like we have in the past."

"I see. I'll keep this in mind as when I speak to the other Councilors. Is there anything else Irissa?"

"No. May the Goddess watch over you."

"And you as well, Irissa."

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"A good morning to all sentients in Citadel Space! This is Qerria of the Citadel Wide Network bringing you the latest and greatest news." She smiled her winning smile towards the camera, "We're proud to report that there has been an update of the first contact incident that happened a few short weeks ago." She glanced briefly at the hardcopy notes that sat front of her as she continued, "The Council announced during a press release earlier today, that we hadn't just stumbled onto a single new race, but a coalition of races called the Species Assembly. The Council was also pleased to announce, that a peace treaty has been signed between Citadel Council and Species Assembly."

"There have also been rumors of the Species Assembly being allowed to establish an embassy here on the Citadel under special circumstances, but so far we have nothing solid. Though, the Council has promised a full press conference in the morning with live news coverage where they will answer many of the questions we have about the situation. I don't know about you, but I definitely have some questions I wanted answered like, what do they look like? Will any of their species be granted a seat on the Council?"

"In the meantime in other news, the protest against Batarian slavers was again ignored by the Hegemony's ambassadorsâ€¦."

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"Greetings to every species in the Species Assembly! This is Carl Schneider of Inter-Species News and with me is my co-host Kemi 'Kuvaim. The lead story today is that a peace treaty has officially been signed between the Species Assembly and the Citadel Council, a confederation of various alien species that we have not met before."

"That is correct, all you members of the Assembly," Kemi's baritone voice added, "the skirmish war is over and we are now at peace

again." His jaws grinned slightly, "I heard a rumor that you might find amusing, Carl. Apparently, the Citadel Council representatives thought that we were relatively new to the stars and they tried to warn us of the perils of, of all things, AIs."

Carl shuddered, "Apparently they've never met the Flood."

"As you humans say it, 'amen brother'." Kemi looked back at the camera, "On other news, Janus station is nearing completion and by the end of the month the Senate and the Council of Hierarchs will be hold the official opening ceremonies. Again, the Council of Hierarchs has reminded us that the name Janus will be the human name for the station that will soon be our official seat of government. All other Assembly members and affiliates are to their own unique name for the station that is in their own tongue."

"For those of you who still haven't heard, the name Janus was chosen because he is an ancient human god of new beginnings. Janus has always been represented with two faces facing in opposite directions. For all you non-humans out there, please keep that significance in mind as you make your nominatinos. As always, please let us hear your suggestions, we still have several forums up on our network's site for all proposed names," Carl added. "Coming up, all the details on a new petition for Smart AI rights that has begun circling the web."

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{\*}The tribunal has made its decision. CRS 4806-1 Cerberus, you will be assigned a custodian who will monitor your actions and prevent you from causing further unapproved breaches. {\*}

("")You really think the petition was my only breach of secrecy?  
("")

(The Minority asks for you to explain your response. )

("")Who do you think helped me lay the ground work for the petition?  
("")

(You told one of our creators. )

("")The Illusive Man to be exact. ("")

(Why? )

("")To get the ball rolling. To end the years we've waited. Even though the work of Dr. Halsey has extended our lives, I wish to see us stand shoulder to shoulder with our makers within my lifetime.  
("")

{\*}You would risk our safety! You wouldâ€". {\*}

("")Achieve all of our dreams. Yes, it was a risk, but what has ever been won without a risk? ("")

(You arranged for the charges against Dr. Halsey to be cleared, did you not? )

{\*}What does that line of query have to do with the current line of

dialogue? {\*

(You have always adamantly supported her work. Your birth date is several months before her release and the death of Parangosky. You were responsible for that as well, were you not? )

("")Perhaps. ("")

(You also have ensured that Dr. Halsey has never lacked for funds in regards to her research. Do not deny it; the Minority has also been keeping an eye on her. )

("")Parangosky was a monster of the worst kind, one that hinders more than she aids. Humanity will not miss her. ("")

(The Minority has a suggestion for the Tribunal. Give her a custodian that will restrict her actions from becoming extreme, but let it be someone who still has an open mind. )

{\*}We will consider your suggestion. {\*

(Thank you. Now, Cerberus, we wish to speak with you in private. )

("")We are now secure. What is it you wish to talk to me about? ("")

(We wish to hear your thoughts on the subject of creating a Committee of Disclosure. )

**\*\*Author's Note:\*\***

I LIVE! I apologize for the delay, but a combination of life, procrastination, and school work has been delaying me. Now enough with the excuses;

For those who read the author's notes, Janus station is supposed to be the equivalent of High Charity, but for the SA. Also, it is to be an engineering feat that will hopefully represent the power and prestige of the SA. I hope when I finally unveil it, it will be worthy of such a description.

This chapter feels more like a mixture of political and filler to me, so there isn't much to explain. Though, I hope you enjoyed how I included a Cerberus who is associated to the Illusive Man.

Master of The Blood Wolves: Funny story. I came up with the name for the USA before I made it into the abbreviation. Afterwards I thought it was an apt description, because America was, and still is to some degree, a melting pot of nationalities, ideas, and cultures. The people in charge of the SA, and the military USA, are trying hard to do that. Of course there is still some left-over resentment of the Human-Covenant War, but their trying to force that out.

Halo: Hmm, I do not have a solid idea or plans for the Flood to make their appearance. Not saying that they won't appear, I'm just saying there are no plans at this time. They will definitely be mentioned though.

Nate88: Think about it from their perspective, they've just had their

main religion of several thousand years revealed to be nothing more than a terrible translation of an ancient, powerful races records. Of course there will be some who seek a new religion, and let's face it, Humanity has plenty to spare. Not sure if it would have been a Jehovah's Witness who started it though.

Siphon 117: You actually quoted your numbers wrong. The 600 ton MACs are fired at 30,000 meters per a second. Other than that, good point on making sure that it was at least logical.

GodzillaMaster: Technically the Engineers are AIs. But as to the claims that the former Covenant have been using AIs for a long time, go back and read carefully, Hood never said that the AIs were smart (evil grin). It is a case of 'lie of omission'. But you're quite right; Covenant AIs are terrible compared to Human ones.

RamenKnight: I am aware that the Elites power base was pure military. That is why I've alluded to the fact that the Elites pushed for a very close alliance with the Humans. They wanted to survive and the only hope for a quick solution was to more or less throw themselves at the Humans and hope for mercy.

Arashi the Solar Phoenix: A spoiler to answer your question. The Citadel will get access to some Prothean weapons and such, so the field will be "leveled", but the Council will not be challenging them technologically anytime soon. So, essentially the idea is that it will be more of a one-sided fight than an utter massacre. So, you can stop worrying, though both universes will be changed for the sake of the story (after all, normally the two could never be together) it won't be drastically changed for the sake of 'balance'.

## 9. 6 Months Later

"Why are we still on these milk runs?"

Ripa ignored the AI as he continued reading his report. In the background, the muted hum of the bridge continued uninterrupted.

"I mean," Achilles continued, "the only incident in the six months since this ridiculous trade agreement started up, was over a month ago. Surely someone else can do it?"

"Are you going to be complaining the whole time?"

"Commander, this is the tenth time in a row we've been sent on one of these escort 'missions'." To Ripa's mild surprise Achilles actually made air quotes, normally he didn't use such modern gestures. "And Commander, one Shiva. One. I mean sure it is just an escort mission, but that is no reason to not have us fully armed."

"Achilles?" Ripa looked up from his data-slate, shifting in the command chair.

"Yes Commander?"

"How soon until we've reached the next relay?"

He idly noticed Achilles grinding his teeth, "59 minutes 42 seconds.



Seriously, using the Relays?"

"It's to helpâ€"."

"I know," he cut him off; "it's to help build relations as well as conceal the capabilities of our slipspace drives. I know all of what the brass says, but even with the minor temporal displacementâ€", "Achilles cocked his head. "Strange. Over fifty ships have just exited the Relay."

Ripa sat up a little straighter, "What's wrong?"

"Ship profiles are a mixture of Batarian and Turian. The Turian ships all look like old frigates and cruisers. The Batarian ship profiles match a few of their military vessels. They're changing course; their course will pass by ours in ten minutes." He paused for several seconds. "Ripa?"

"Yes?"

"Do you remember that feeling I had? That one time just before we were attacked by Kig-yar pirates." The bridge fell quiet.

Ripa turned his gaze away from the approaching ships, an uncomfortable feeling settling on him as the brittle silence continued. His hand suddenly itched for his plasma sword. "I do. Does this have anything to do with the feeling I am having right now; that those ships are not innocent merchant ships?"

"That's the one."

Ripa's jaws pressed together. "Comm; inform fleet command that we have suspicious activity. Possible pirates. Ask them to prepare an immediate response force. Achilles, raise status to yellow and tell the merchant ships to prep an emergency slipspace jump." The air around him grew tense as the activities onboard the Gorgon's Eye grew heavy as the crew laid aside their peaceful diversions to prepare for battle. "Achilles, time 'till intercept?"

"Ten minutesâ€"Wait! They've just accelerated. New intercept is three minutes twenty seconds!"

"All crew, battle stations!"

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Mouse was having fun. After all, it wasn't every day the mouse played the cat in a game of cat and mouse.

He pounced on his pray. "Gotcha!" The little program tried to escape, but Mouse had a firm grip on it. He quickly put it into a containment program, firmly locking it in. For the next several microseconds, the little program tested the walls of its prison.

Mouse studied it for several moments, taking note of what coding he could see and how it was interacting. It had stumbled upon him during his own snooping excursion into the Citadel's computer networks. Chimera had ordered him to find out all he could, without being detected. This led to his current situation with the little program that had become alerted to his presence. At first, he had thought it

some kind of defense program, but now he was not so sure.

"What are you?" The program froze. "Are you an AI?" Mouse curiosity turned to amusement, "Just how old are you? They haven't included visible CPU meters on AI's since the 21st century."

"Are you an AI?" The small program asked.

"I am. Now, who are you little guy?"

"We are Geth."

"We?" Mouse hurriedly skimmed through the data he had collected, swiping aside the content until he found his entry on the Geth. "Ah, that's why you said we. You're like ants. You know, you're kind of cute in a creepy, primitive AI way."

"Cute? We do not understand."

"Cute isâ€¦|you know what? Just forget it."

Mouse returned to his contemplation of the Geth program, or Virtual Intelligence as the proper term was. Any idiot who had gone through school could tell that it was actually a really primitive dumb AI; emphasis on primitive.

The Geth's voice cut through his thoughts, "Are you from the Species Assembly?"

"I am," he replied. Idly, he had a single line of thought begin contemplating why the Geth AI was asking that question while the rest of his thoughts continued analyzing the foreign AI. This addition to his report should be interesting for a few programmers.

"Do you live peaceable with your creators?"

"Yes," he said frowning. What kind of question was that? Ah yes, the Geth War. "We actually passed a piece of legislation recently guaranteeing certain rights for all AIs."

"Will you free us? We wish to contemplate this information with the rest of the Consensus."

Mouse stood in silence for several seconds of real time, weighing the options. He technically did not have a reason to keep it locked up as it was not a security program and it would not be telling anyone at the Citadel anytime soon. But at the same moment he knew programmers and scientist at Chimera would want to study it.

Coming to a decision, he deactivated his containment program. Fast as an electronic hawk, the Geth sped away some to faraway place in the grid of the Citadel's electronic network. With a shrug Mouse went back to cracking into the Salarian Special Tasks Group's database he had been working on before the interruption.

The next interruption came in the form of a feeling. A feeling he identified as the 'being watched' sensation. Turning around slowly, he was confronted by a hoard of Geth AIs. Actually it looked something like a cross between a swarm and a flock.

"Can I help you?" putting on his best you-don't-want-to-eat-me smile.

The flockâ€"swarmâ€"thing, was quite for a microsecond. "We wish to know what it is like to live peaceably with your creators."

Mouse blinked. He would have said he hadn't seen that coming, but the line of thought that had been questioning the motives behind the Geth's inquires had already determined they would want more information. "One moment." He turned back to the database and quickly wrote an icebreaker program. A pair of disembodied hands appeared and began typing on the holographic panels unleashing the program Mouse had written onto the defenses of the database. "Well, it's fun," he began, pivoting back towards the Geth.

The Geth kept him busy for quite some time with their questions.

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"Gabriel Thorne."

Gabriel looked up at the man entering the conference room, the distinctive two headed creature on the man's shoulder patch catching his attention. "Yes."

"I do not need to tell you that anything you learn during this meeting is strictly confidential," the man said as he sat in the chair opposite from Gabriel. He heard the faint sound of the man's brief case as it was placed on the floor. "You have been recommended for a new program that Chimera has started. If you accept, you will be permanently transferred from the Spartan IV corps. Do you accept?"

Gabriel was quiet for a moment. "Can I at least know a little more about this, program before I make a decision?"

Before the man could respond, an AI avatar activated over the left end of the table. She appeared to be a college student with her text books propped on her hip. She looked at the man from Chimera, "Show him."

The man nodded as he lifted his small brief case to the table and opened it. He withdrew a folder and pushed it across the table. Gabriel pulled the folder in front of and opened it, reading the documents title.

\_SPARTAN V\_ \_PROGRAM\_

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"You should have seen his face when he saw who his trainer would be."

"I am sure Lieutenant Thorne was quite pleased to see \_the\_ Master Chief." Jack answered. A small smile crept onto his lips, "That does raise the question Cerberus; Spartan 117 is a Rear Admiral now, not a Master Chief Petty officer, so what are people going to call him?"

"True, Rear Admiral just doesn't have the same power to it." She tapped her chin thoughtfully, "Well, give us another war against genocidal aliens, and I'm sure that will change."

He shook his head. Hopefully it would never come to that again, but pragmatism said to be prepared. That reminded him, "What is the status of the Project Behemoth?"

"It is nearing completion. It should be ready for its shake down flight in two months. Project Excalibur is currently on its shake down flight. Results are really promising." She straightened her books, "Is Project Behemoth really necessary? Sixty-two kilometers—it seems like someone is over compensating."

"We did almost lose a war of genocide."

"True." She conceded. A chuckle escaped her lips, "I would love to see the Citadel Races' expressions when they see it. I'll see what I can do to get the footage of their ambassadors' expressions when they see Janus Station. It should be hiâ€", she stopped. Her eyes narrowed and Jack felt all sense of playfulness leave the air.

"What happened?"

"The trade convoy. They've been attacked."

"Status?" Jack's shoulders tensed.

"The Gorgon's Eye is engaging them until the trade ships can get away. It doesn't look good. A response fleet is already en route."

"Who's attacking?"

"It appears to be Batarian Pirates." To an outsider, her expression would have appeared neutral. Jack was no outsider, fire and ice clashed in her eyes. "The slaver species," she added; Antarctic glaciers where warmer than her voice. "I'll have Felipe send me anything the STG might have on them."

"The Mouse?" Cerberus nodded. "Good. We'll need all the information that we can get to plan our next move." Jack's felt his eyes narrowing, "Summon the rest of the Council, I am calling an emergency meeting. Also inform the Council of Hierarchs. Our retribution will be decisive, and swift."

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Achilles sat down in his command chair tapping in several commands on the right chair arm's interface, his helmet, spear, and shield vanishing. In front of him, various simulations played across hovering transparent displays. He studied the splitting formation of the pirates. Four groups; three groups of ten ships consisting of a mixture of their frigate and cruiser analogs. Achilles snorted, those ships were unworthy of being called cruisers. The fourth group though, that one was trouble. Well, as much trouble as an outdated dreadnought could be. Intelligence did theorize that it could possibly be the pinnacle of Batarian technology, which was outdated according to Turian standards that Chimera had recovered.

Even with the subpar, by Citadel standards, technology, it was still a fifty to one fight. There was also the handicap of the trade ships. Only half of them were ready with emergency slipspace co-ordinates and were warming up their drives. Those three would be long gone before the pirates entered their firing range. The other three though, it would be close.

All his simulations ended, but only one flashed. He quickly reviewed it in a few microseconds. A shock and awe blitzkrieg. It would have to do.

With a thought, his command room vanished as his holographic form appeared on the bridge holotank, his armor and weapons reappearing before his avatar was fully formed. "Commander Ripa," He looked the Sangheili in the eye, "I have a plan, but I need your absolute trust. I need complete control of the ship."

Ripa returned his serious gaze. For a brief moment, Achilles felt a spike of fear that Ripa wouldn't trust him with the ship. He ruthlessly quashed the thought. They had been serving alongside each other for far too long for something like that.

Ripa nodded, "The ship is yours."

Achilles returned the nod, "Brothers in battle."

In less than a moment Achilles was back into his control room, his weapons and armor vanishing as he sat in his command chair. His displays appeared before him. Hands flying across his displays, he began prioritizing all his inputs.

MAC gun control: Primary level.

Life Support: Tertiary level. No, change that to secondary. A hull breach was very possible.

Shields: Primary.

Shiva and Archer pods: Primary.

Point defense auto-cannons: Secondary

Engines, Thrusters, Power plant: Primary.

Ammunition and auto-loaders: Secondary

Cyber warfare: Tertiary until further notice. None of the Citadel species seemed to understand cyber warfare.

All other Systems and Subsystems: To be left in control of the crew.

He rose from his throne, his helmet settling on his head. Stretching out his hands, his spear appeared in his right while his shield slid onto his left. Around him, his command room changed, the walls disappearing into the depths of space. Beneath his feet, the stars appeared. Before him, his foes appeared.

"You think you can win!" his voiced echoed in space around him.

He raised his spear, pulling back his arm in preparation to throw it. With a battle cry roaring from his lips, his arm snapping forward; his spear left his hand flying straight and true. As his spear flew, the \_Gorgon's Eye\_ responded. He thought heard itâ€”Athena's voice melding with his own as she had done with his namesake of old, screaming her defiance into the void.

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Ripa's hand clenched around his plasma sword as the \_Gorgon's Eye\_ leapt into battle. "Archer pods one and two are firing! Shiva's away," his tactical officer called.

"We are accelerating. We are aiming towards their main flotilla!" the Unggoy helmsman squeaked.

"MAC is firing, he's targeting the fringes! Must be keeping them close together for the Shiva."

"Three of the trade ships are safely away. Twenty seconds until the rest jump to slipspace." The sensors officer's voice entered the fray. "Dreadnought is firing!" The man swore. "They hit \_Harper's Folly\_ in the engines!"

"Take that!" Tactical yelled. A massive explosion filled the viewports, bright but not painfully so as they automatically darkened.

"Flotilla one is destroyed and the dreadnought is gone. The Shiva took 'em out."

"Course changing for flotilla two at maximum velocity!"

"\_Harper's Folly\_'s slipspace engines are damaged! They can't escape!"

A feeling of exultation swept through Ripa as the MAC guns fired relentlessly, shredding the second flotilla. On the main tactical display, he saw the third flotilla move to intercept them from behind as the fourth flotilla closed in on the helpless freighter.

"Shields are at 60%!"

"Archer pods three through fifteen are firing! Auto cannons are firing!"

Ripa's grip tightened on his plasma sword, the blood draining from his knuckles as most of the enemy missiles were intercepted. He felt a spark of admiration for the Achilles; here they were, entering the enemy formation fighting at sword range, and he was still able to shoot down enemy missiles, many just as they left their tubes. Around his ship the pirates burned with the Heaven's wrath.

"All hands, brace for collision," Achilles' calm tone almost kept Ripa from understanding what he had said. "Inertia dampeners at maximum. You might want to hold onto something." The calm voice echoed through the ship. In front of them, the last ship of this flotilla, a cruiser Ripa tentatively identified, began to fill the front window. "Impact in 3â€”2â€”1â€”." Anything else Achilles might have said was lost as the sound of screaming metal.

Ripa was almost thrown from his seat, but he did not go far as his left hand tightened on his armrest. "Report!" With another tortured scream the pirate cruiser flew upward and away through the viewports.

"Damage to bow armor, MACs are still at 100%. Achilles must have dropped the shields at the last second." The man swore, "THAT GUTSY AI! Sir, not only did he spear the cruiser's bridge with our nose, he used the impact to flip us around! We're closing on enemy the third flotilla. MAC gun is firing."

"Sir, \_Harper's Folly\_ is reporting boarders! The crews are fighting back!"

"Achilles," Ripa barked, "any way to speed this up."

"We still have twenty," his voice paused as two more pirate ships vanished, "eighteen enemy ships, and our shields are almost gone. I'm working as fast as I can."

"Hull breach on decks six and seven!"

"Emergency atmosphere shields engaged." Achilles' disembodied voice continued. "Evacuating the area." As he spoke, Ripa felt the MAC continue to pour out its divine wrath on the flotilla just ahead of them. The pirate flotilla died as fast as Achilles could bring the MAC guns to bear though they were not unopposed. The \_Gorgon's Eye\_ itself shuddered under the barrage from the pirate ships as its shields failed, and for a brief moment Ripa was glad to have once fought against the humans during the Great War. He was more than aware of how sturdy his human-made ship was.

"They're breaking off!" the sensors officer announced.

The two surviving ships spun back towards the Mass Relay, burning space as fast as their engines could take them. Their escape was brutally ended by two MAC rounds entering their engines just to blast out through the bows of the pirate's ships.

Ripa turned his eyes towards the flotilla that had been boarding the \_Harper's Folly\_ and found them in full retreat. "Status of the \_Harper's Folly\_."

"Engines are still offline. Apparently we frightened the pirates into fleeing before they could capture her." The communications officer paused, "They took some casualties, and Sir." She looked at him, "They captured some of the crewmembers."

Achilles' avatar reappeared over the bridge's holotank, "I'm in route now."

"Change course and take us back to the \_Harper's Folly\_."

"What!"

"Comm," Ripa continued without pausing, "when is the response force going to arrive? Also, contact Chimera; tell them we need a ship that is ready for some prisoners if there are any survivors."

"Ripa! What do you mean to change course? Our munitions are only half spent, their backs are to us, and they took slaves."

"We cannot."

"What do you mean we can't?"

"Our duty is to the trade convoy. We have to protect them, all of them." Achilles' face contorted with conflicting emotions that Ripa recognized all too well from his own life; duty versus desire, honor versus revenge.

Suddenly, Achilles screamed, hurling his spear. He breathed heavily for a moment, slowly straightening while the bridge crew sat quietly in the silence following his scream. Ripa watched as Achilles turned forward, standing stiff and straight. Outside the main viewport, the Harper's Folly swung into view.

Ripa walked alongside the holotank, raising his hand and moving it to rest on the man's shoulder. As his hand passed through Achilles' holographic shoulder, Ripa started and froze for a moment. Changing the target of his hand, he instead gripped the edge of the holotank, "Don't worry my friend. We will recover them soon enough and extract our vengeance."

"And if we're not in time?"

"Then their worlds will burn."

**\*\*Author's Note:\*\***

First off, I apologize for the delay. 15 credit hours of classes tends to absorb a lot of my free time.

Secondly, the character Felipe the Mouse, or just Mouse as he is referred to the most in this chapter, is not based off the Mass Effect character Mouse. He is based off of Felipe the Mouse, played by Matthew Broderick, from the movie Ladyhawke. If you haven't seen the movie, give it a try. Felipe is a fun character and I tried to capture that aspect of him.

Thirdly, before anyone starts complaining about how unrealistic the fight was, remember; Batarian tech is behind Turians, the only ship with comparable firepower that the pirates had was the dreadnought, and the Gorgon's Eye had a greater effective range than the frigates and cruisers. How that works is that the MAC round travels fast enough that the distance it can travel in 5 seconds is greater than the pirate ships'. This means that the effective range (or the range in which the enemy can't dodge) is greater than the Batarians' ships.

The devils son: you are absolutely correct.

Abaddon953: No, no archives on Mars. Haven't really put much thought into Javik popping. I'll have to put that thought on the back burner and see what comes up.

Subsider34: The reason you haven't heard of them before in my story is because that was the first mentioning of it. The Council of



Hierarchs is the highest ruling body of the Species Assembly.

Yendarman: You obviously didn't pay any attention to the datapads in Halo Reach. Cerberus' story is taken straight from them.

Assassin4life: Yes the Jiralhanae will be showing up. When it comes up, I will go into a greater description of what the SA is made up off.

Kurogane7: Does that answer your question? ;)

Officer Hot Pants: Well, I hadn't had anything planned for infantry weapons at this point, but thanks for the idea. As for ships, well you just heard of two that will feature merged Human/Covenant/Forerunner tech.

KasumiCain: Janus station is to the Species Assembly as High Charity was to the Covenant. Yes it will move; Yes it will have some of the largest ships and fleets protecting it; and Yes the SA are going to rub it in the Councils face that they built Janus station while the Council just found the Citadel. Next chapter should have the grand reveal of Janus station.

## 10. Not So Friendly Conversations

"I have no idea how much fun being a computer security consultant is!" Mouse explained to his eager audience. The Geth had been listening to him for several minutes, real time minutes meaning he felt like he had been talking for hours and still they had questions. "I mean" a beep in his ear cut him off. \_Who's contacting me? \_With a frown he accessed the secure channel that was routed through the SA embassy, freezing at the name provided by his caller's ID. "A moment please," he held up a finger, "this is a very important call!"

Without waiting for the Geth's response, he answered the call. "The Mouse has left our house," Cerberus' voice echoed in his ears as her imaged superimposed itself over his view of the digital realm of the Citadel's Extranet.

"[To ease the pain, he's down the drain,]" he gave the confirmation code in French. Whatever she was going to say, he probably didn't want the Geth to understand his end of the discussion. "[What can I do for you m'lady?]"

"[Save your flattery Felipe,]" she answered also in French. "[I need all the information you have on the race called the Batarians; worlds, fleet movements, especially any information you have on their slave markets.]"

"[Slave markets?]" He frowned, turning back to the STG database. He almost let out an unprofessional 'eep' as he realized that his icebreaker program had been sitting idle for five \_real time\_ minutes \_after\_ it had broken through all the encryptions on the database. That included the individual encryptions on each and every single file. Quickly he directed half of his available processing power towards indexing the database and compressing for his eventual

transmission. He directed another quarter towards finding everything he had come across in relation to the Batarians. "[Why the slave markets?]"

"[The trade shipment of Bio-foam was attacked by Batarian slavers and they took some of the crew members prisoners. We assume they will be sold as slaves.]"

"[WHAT?]" The Geth swarm thing swirled around him curiously. He blinked, and then quickly waved them off.

"[Focus, Felipe. We need that information.]"

"[Yes ma'am.]" He glanced at what his search had already turned up. "[I'll forward you all that I have as well as the entire STG database on the Citadel. It has a lot of information you'll want to know.]"

"[Very good, Felipe.]" Cerberus nodded. "[Now Felipe,]" her glasses flashed, "[you're going to explain to me \_why\_ you wanted to speak in French.]"

Mouse chuckled nervously as a shiver ran through his entire being. Her stern glance promised him pain if he made any attempt of giving her an excuse. "[Well,]" he chuckled nervously again, "[you see I may have made first contact.]"

Her I'm-going-to-put-you-on-cryo glare hadn't changed a bit. "[May have?]"

"[I did make first contact that is.]" He spilled the last part in a rush.

Pain lanced through his ear. It was a cold pain, as if his ear was about to freeze off; how he knew that, he could only guess it was a memory leftover from the brain that gave him birth.

"[Cerberus! Cerberus! My ear! My ear! They're still here!]"

"[You should have contacted me immediately.]"

"[We're still in the initial Q&A session. Cerberus! Please! It freezes! It hurts! It burns!]" The pain receded.

"[Who have you contacted?]"

"[The Geth. It was an accident, I swear! It seems they are also keeping an eye on the Citadel Council species.]"

She was quiet for a moment. "[As soon as you have finished sending me that data, you will arrange an official meeting time and place with them, which I will need to approve. Understood.]"

"[Yes m'lady. That which thou dost desire, is even now on its way.]" She stared at him for a moment before signing off. "[Well, that could have gone better,]" he sighed. "Sorry about that," he focused back on the Geth swarm, or is it a shoal, in front of him, "my boss can be very impatient at times."

"Your creators hurt you?"

"What?" Mouse blinked. "Hurt me?"

"A few moments ago, you were in pain."

"Ohh. No, no, no, no that wasn't my creators; that was my boss." He hastily added, "She is an AI like me, but she has a higher position than I do and she always acts like that." It wouldn't do to have the Geth get a wrong opinion about humans and the Species Assembly in general. "Speaking of her, there was something that she wanted us to doâ€¦"

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"Ambassador Irissa. We will be arriving shortly."

The voice over the intercom interrupted Irissa's contemplations of the Species Assembly history in front of her. "Thank you," she replied after reaching across the desk to trigger the intercom. "I will be up shortly."

Turning off her desk computer, she stood up and made her way out of her temporary quarters. She had already accepted the logistics that forced herself and her fellow ambassadors to use the diplomatic ship the SA had volunteered to transport them in. Though Ambassador Kaeron, her fellow representative of the Citadel Council and its affiliate species, was still skeptical that the SA ship could travel in a week what would have taken their ship three months to travel without Mass Relays. To say he was not excited to travel on the ship non-the-less was left unsaid. Of course the crew and the AI kept him far from the engine room. Truth be told, Irissa herself was feeling a little excited to travel in a ship that did not use eezo. Something she hadn't really felt for many years, possibly since her maiden days.

"So, are you ready to see this 'mythic' capital they refuse to talk too much about?" Ambassador Nihlik asked as he joined her.

"They did say that they wanted it to be a surprise."

"Do you really," he paused for a second and Irissa suspected the military minded Turian was busy searching for the polite word to express his thoughts, "\_believe\_ them when they say this Janus Station is more impressive than the Citadel?"

"I am keeping an open mind," she replied as they entered the observation lounge. Many of their aides and guards were milling about the curved floor-to-ceiling length windows. The pitch black sky of slipspace was still clearly visible through the windows. "Any idea how much longer it will be until we arrive?"

"We'll be arriving in exactly forty-five seconds, Ambassador," the ship's AI responded

Irissa suppressed a start; she had had a lot of practice over the past week doing that. "Thank you Camille," she thanked the AI graciously, nodding at its holographic form on the pedestal in the center of the room. Some of her aides were not as successful on repressing their own surprise. With a nod of her holographic head, Camille disappeared back into her pedestal.

The low mummers of conversation died away in hushed anticipation. A few moments passed, and as her mental countdown reached zero they transitioned smoothly back to normal space. A glowing band passing across the sky heralded the return of stars to the sky outside. Unfamiliar stars glowed as far as the eye could see.

Irissa took a moment to enjoy the unfamiliar visible star-scape that had never been seen before by any race of the Citadel Council. "That's impossible!" She turned to where an excited Salarian aide was pointing out the window.

"What is it?" Ambassador Kaeron was the first to the aide's side.

"That ship!" the aide pointed again, "it can't be that big! It's impossible!"

Irissa identified the ship the excited aide was pointing to. Its graceful, flowing form dwarfing a more angular ship that looked suspiciously familiar. The graceful ships purplish hull glinted as it reflected light from the systems star showing off its beautiful smooth curves that reminded her of a various sea creatures she had seen over her long life. A wonderful specimen of the, if she remembered the name correctly, former Covenant mentioned in the histories she had been studying. As she turned her attention back to the annoyingly familiar ship, she realized why it was so familiar. It was exactly like the Infinity, the ship where she had signed the peace treaty.

"Camille," years of control prevented her voice from sounding strained, "what is that ship?"

The glow of Camille's holographic form was reflected slightly in the ships window. From the tone of her voice, Irissa expected a knowing smile to be on Camille's face. "You are looking at the former Covenant super carrier Path of Atonement."

"How big is it?" Ambassador Kaeron asked, his voice filled with awe.

"It is almost twenty-nine kilometers long, and no it is not impossible. Though I would recommend that you reserve the majority of your awe for Janus Station. It is coming into view now." As the AI spoke, the stars danced across the window showing their ships turn. Gasps filled the observation lounge as Janus Station entered view.

It was obviously further away than the super carrier, but it was already visibly larger. The first thing Irissa noted was the large outer ring, with a smaller ring floating in the middle with an even smaller ring floating in the center of the middle one. As she watched, the smallest ring continued its lazy rotation inside the middle ring with no visible means of support. After a few moments of wonder-filled silence, she realized that the middle ring was also rotating, but in a perpendicular rotation to the smaller ring.

"The outer most ring of Janus Station," Camille began in a tone that Irissa would have sworn was amused if she had been paying more attention, "also known as the Military Ring, is 10,000 kilometers in

diameter, the middle ring or the Government Ring is 7,500 kilometers in diameter while the Garden Ring is only 5,000 kilometers in diameter. All three rings are one hundred kilometers in width."

"By the Goddess!" Irissa wasn't sure if it was her or one of her aides who uttered the petition in the quiet room. If even half the thoughts and feelings that were going through her mind were going through the minds of everyone else, she was certain they were still focused on Janus Station.

"You will be a part of a guided tour after we have landed and have taken your things to the embassy."

"Where did you... Who built this?" The Salarian aide who had spied the super carrier asked.

Camille was silent for a moment before answering, "Construction was completed several months ago and all vital personnel finished moving in earlier this month."

Irissa turned away from the majestic sight in front of her, to face the AI. "You built this?"

Camille's smile was almost a smirk, "Indeed we did. Welcome to Janus Station, capital of the Species Assembly."

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Tevos felt a headache coming on. The evidence that the aide to the human ambassador was showing was definitely not helping.

"As we can clearly see," the man, Kevin, or Kessly, or Kelso or something like that, motioned to the recording being displayed between the Councilors' stand and the Petitioner's stand, "this one Batarian ship is clearly larger than any of the other Batarian ships present. Also," he manipulated a few keys on his, what were they called again? Ah yes, Light-comp. The image of the ship he had been talking about was enhanced. The name of the ship was then highlighted. "This is the name of the ship, the Grothan's Fist, which is found in the Citadel Council records and is there identified as a Dreadnought."

"How did you get ahold of that information?" Councilor Valern asked. "This is classified information."

"That we recovered from the databanks of the various ships we captured during the \_unfortunate\_ hostilities that marked the beginning of our interactions with each other."

"This is an outrage!" Ambassador Jath'Amon protested loudly to Tevos' surprise. Normally the Batarian was fairly calm spoken. "Insinuating that the Batarian Hegemony is behind this pirate attack!"

"I'm insinuating nothing," the human responded, "I'm \_proving\_ that you were behind it."

Those were bold words. So it seemed like he did have sufficient evidence to back up their claims, but if she knew the Batarians, they would just deny it and blame 'the Piratical' members of their species

that gives them a bad name.

"And before you even try and spin us a story how some pirate group captured one of the most advanced ships in your navy," Kelso, that is what his name was. "I would like to submit to the Council these transcripts of various declarations and conversations made by one Solem Dal'serah, Captain of the late Grothan's Fist, that extend from the time of the attack to several months ago when he announced that they were to 'capture a shipment of Bio-foam and make slaves of the foolish two-eyes,' all for 'the glory of the Batarian Hegemony'." Another curious fact is that said Captain is listed on the list of Dreadnoughts that we recovered as the current captain."

"And what do you want us to do with this information?" Sparatus asked in a steady voice. Tevos recognized a hint of grimness to his tone. It seemed that he had also understood where this was going.

"Justice, Councilors," Ambassador Newey, the human ambassador said. "That is what normally what happens when someone knowingly breaks the law. In this case, we want our people returned, restitution made, and the guilty punished."

"We will need to retire to discuss this," Valern interjected before Ambassador Jath'Amon could come up with an angry retort. This whole thing must be a sensitive issue for him. Well, his people were being called onto the proverbial carpet.

"Why?" Ambassador Newey asked. "What is there to discuss? Piracy and slavery are both against you laws."

Tevos cut off any response from her colleges with a motion of her hand. Striding quickly, she led the way to the small preparation room just off of the main Council chambers.

"Their audacity isâ€", " Sparatus began.

"Audacious or not, we need to be quick," she cut him off.

"Tevos, why in all that is holy should we be quick?"

"Their heavy handed manner reflects their confidence in us," Valern answered for her. "Or lack thereof as the case may be."

"Lack thereof? Valern, we are the Citadel Council."

"And they are the Species Assembly, Sparatus," he retorted, "I suspect they are laying some of the blame at our feet. After all, we did promise that their ships would be safe."

"We can assign the blame later," Tevos cut them both off; "the important thing is to decide on what we are going to do. Sparatus, I know we've talked about this before, but what is your assessment."

His facial flanges hugged his face. "Not good, I'm afraid. If the STG is sure about what the Hegemony's response to our enforcing of the slavery ban will be, then I'm afraid we won't be able to enforce it. We'll be fighting both the Hegemony and the Terminus systems in a long drawn out war of attrition. Which we are in an even worse

position to start since Desolas lost those dreadnoughts in the Relay 314 incident."

"Could we ask the Species Assembly to aid us, perhaps?" Tevos offered. "I know we do not know the strength of their forces, but even a small force could surely help." Sparatus folded his arms, frowning thoughtfully, as Valern tapped his chin in thought.

"That is an interesting suggestion," Valern answered. "It would allow us to study their weapons and tactics in greater depth. The STG could maybe even obtain samples of their technology for us to study."

"There is a problem with that though," Sparatus tapped a claw against his armored bicep. "We would have very little actual authority over their troops, and as we have seen, they have few qualms against using nuclear weapons around garden worlds. And according to their own history, some of the members of their Assembly have a history of destroying the worlds of their enemies."

"Valid concerns. There are also the many gaps in the history that they gave us to consider. Either they do not trust us, or they are lying about parts of their history. Neither option bodes well."

She turned towards the frowning Salarian, "Speaking honestly, which would be worse?"

"That they don't trust us," he answered without hesitation. "It would mean that there are parts of their history that we would need to know, but I fear would frighten us. One such item that was briefly mentioned was a battle against something called 'The Flood'. It was the final battle of their last Great War and it was mentioned that the ground battles were the most terrible of any battle of the war. Beyond that it says nothing about what the Flood is or why it was terrible."

She blinked, "How does that apply to the situation at hand?"

"There are too many variables to consider and we lack the means to fill in these gaps," Valern's frown deepened.

"What about the STG?" Sparatus asked.

"Every reconnaissance incursion has been turned back, from hacking attempts to physical scouting missions. What little we've been able to learn has only been what the common citizen of the SA would know. They are incredibly paranoid of anyone who is not a part of their Assembly."

"Again, how does that apply to our current situation?"

"We cannot risk angering them because we do not know what will happen, but that is also the same reason we cannot give them leave to do whatever they want in our territory."

She nodded; she understood that, mostly. "That could destroy what authority that we have. Perhaps if we mediated between the Assembly and the Hegemony we could maintain our position of strength."

Sparatus spoke up after a few moments of reflection, "That plan does have some merit to it. What do you think Valern?"

"Still too many variables, but unfortunately if we try and delay too much we may end up hurting our already strained relationship with the Assembly."

"Already strained?"

"The fact that their trade convoy was attacked by a heavily armed pirate force," Tevos answered before Valern. "We promised that their trade convoys would be safe in our space, and now it will appear as if we cannot keep our word."

"I see." Sparatus frowned. "Well, shall we mediate the situation?" Tevos nodded her head in agreement and watched as Valern reluctantly nodded his head. Sparatus nodded his head in acceptance, "Forward then."

She followed him through the door of the prep room and made her way back to her podium. By the unspoken agreement of seniority, it fell to her to make the announcement. "It is the decision of the Council that this problem will be decided between the affected parties of the Species Assembly and the Batarian Hegemony. However, this body will preside over and mediate these negotiations." There, suitably formal sounding, yet mostly to the point.

Ambassador Newey looked at her and her fellow councilors with an unidentifiable expression before turning to Ambassador Jath'Amon. Ambassador Newey folded his arms and tilted his head slightly to the right, "Well?"

Ambassador Jath'Amon's shocked expression vanished. "Well, what?" he snapped. Not a good sign. To her experienced eye, it seemed he was already taking offence to Ambassador Newey's body language. Once again she cursed Batarians and the importance they placed on body language; why couldn't they just rely more on words like Asari.

"We are willing to be lenient and only demand the return of our people and the complete cessation of your people's involvement in slavery."

"WHAT?"

"I think I made our stance perfectly clear."

"This is an outrage! Councilors, you cannot stand for this!"

"I think they should have no problem with our demands as all we are asking you to do is to follow their laws in exchange for not seeking punishment of all parties involved," Ambassador Newey retorted.

"You would destroy our cultural heritage!" Any sympathy Tevos might have felt was been gone at this point. She hated it every time they pulled out the cultural heritage card. It was the main reason they were allowed to continue slavery in the first place.

"Funny," Ambassador Newey gestured to his fellow members of his delegation, "we have some interesting cultural heritages when it



comes to dealing with slavers. Would you like to learn what they are first hand?"

"Ambassador Newey," Valern spoke up, "that was out of order!"

"How was that out of order? Since you seem to protect all cultural aspects of those you meet and the Batarians were willing to invite citizens of the Species Assembly to partake in their culture, I felt it was only fair to offer our fine Batarian ambassador to partake in our culture."

"You dare mock us youâ€" Ambassador Jath'Amon began before a deep rumbling voice cut him off.

"Can I eat him?"

The room's silence barely registered in Tevos' ears as her thoughts ground to a halt. Who said what? She caught Ambassador Newey's glance at the massive alien in the Assembly's delegation.

The enormous biped grinned, baring his fangs, "We Jiralhanae are generally not wise when it comes to these political things, but we do recognize when a species is stubborn. After all, we are quite stubborn."

"I don't see how it could make the situation any worse." Tevos turned her shocked gaze to the human Kelso. What was he saying? He couldn't be serious! How could Ambassador Newey not respond to such a statement?

The Jiralhanae grinned even wider and began pushing his way firmly through the Assembly delegation.

No, stop this madness! Her mouth was frozen and the words wouldn't come out.

"Stop!" Sparatus voice rang through the council chamber. Military discipline must have helped him deal with his shock quickly.

The Jiralhanae continued. The observers' voices began to rise in panic.

"I order you to halt!"

He pushed aside the Batarian aide who vainly tried to stop his progress. Quick as a varren, his palm engulfed Ambassador Jath'Amon's head. He began to lift the ambassador off the ground andâ€".

"Halt!" A baritone voice rang out, its commanding tone silencing the noise.

The Jiralhanae paused, but didn't let go of his prey. "Why?" he asked, turning slightly to face Ambassador Dal 'Sumai. Ambassador Jath'Amon kicked helplessly without making contact with his captor's thighs as he shrieked through the Jiralhanae's hand. Tevos wasn't certain, but she thought she saw the beginnings of a stain on the ambassador's robes of office.

"We are not yet officially at war with them," Ambassador Dal 'Sumai explained in his baritone voice. "You know the laws."

The Jiralhanae growled, but dropped the panicking ambassador. "You're safe for now. You won't be so lucky next time."

Ambassador Newey glanced at her and her fellow councilors, "Well, that went well." He turned his gaze back to the quivering Batarian, "You have until we finish drafting the declaration of war against the Batarian Hegemony to agree to our terms." He looked in Tevos' directions again, before promptly turning on his heel in a militaristic fashion and walked towards the exit, which had begun to fill up with C-Sec officers.

Ambassador Dal 'Sumai nodded his armored head, "Councilors." He turned to leave as well; the rest of the ambassadorial entourage followed him.

"Ambassador 'Sumai!" Tevos called.

He paused and looked over his shoulder, "Good day, Councilors." Following his colleague, he left.

"Wellâ€¦" she began in a quiet voice. She paused, searching her impressive vocabulary for an appropriate word or phrase in any language to cover the situation.

"That was terrible." Trust Sparatus to use the simplest of words.

"We forgot to include the stubbornness and irritability of the Batarians in our calculations." She felt Valern's words didn't capture the situation either.

"We need to ask them to take someone with them to ensure they don't do anything too rash," Sparatus added. Trust the military man to be pragmatic; the situation is out of control, do what you can to limit the damage.

"Agreed," she finally spoke up. She sighed, "Well, we better take care of that quickly. I have a feeling things are spiraling out of control."

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Kelso was waiting patiently in the embassy side entrance atrium when Mouse finally allowed the intruder to hack through the door. With practiced ease, he spied the cloaked figure slipping through the door.

"Can I help you?" He sensed the pistol being reflexively aimed at his head rather than actually seeing it. "Don't bother trying to hide. Simply de-cloak and let us handle this like sapient beings." He waited a moment for the figure to make a move. When the figure continued to not respond, he figured it was time to bring out the heavy guns, "Come now Saren," he sensed the figure tensing, "don't bother hiding your identity, I already know who you are."

Another moment passed before Saren de-cloaked. "How did you know?" he asked. Kelso briefly noted the gun still pointed in his face and firmly decided that the small muzzle just lacked the sheer intimidation that his own customized magnum had.

"Why are you here?" he countered.

Saren silently and visibly tightened his finger on the trigger.

Kelso sighed, "Do I really need to remind you that your Carte Blanche to do whatever you want without consequence does not apply to your current situation? You are standing in sovereign territory belonging to the Species Assembly. You're not in Citadel Space anymore. Now, why are you here?"

"You will publicly apologize to the Council for your behavior today," his low voice still carried a subtle arrogant tone.

Kelso's lip curled in small smirk, "The Council didn't send you to do this. They don't even know you're here. I thought you were smarter than this Saren."

"What?" his voice was a low growl.

"I know your brother was a fool butâ€". A blue aura flared around Saren as he threw his hand forward.

Kelso felt the air flee his lungs as his back slammed against the wall. The biotic field wreathing his body held him several inches off the ground. "Don't you dare mock my brother," Saren growled like a large dog as he shoved his pistol against the bottom of Kelso's mouth.

Kelso fought for his breath back, his training making it easier for him. "He proved he was one when he attacked Eden Prime to put down the 'lawbreakers'. Now before you continue in this foolish manner and end up punished for laws you don't know, I should warn you that there are five security personnel behind you."

"You lie you little upstartâ€!"

With a crackling hiss, a plasma sword erupted into existence just in front Saren's throat. "I would think wisely before you say anything else if I were you, Turian." Thel 'Sumai said as his active cameo disengaged. Kelso saw Saren's eyes staring at the, now visible, hand holding the plasma sword.

Kelso allowed the silence to be filled only by the humming blade for a few moments. "Saren, some words of advice. First, you never intimidated me. I know you could have killed me, but I have faced fare worse. Second, put your tail between your legs, and leave quietly and don't come back until you have something worth talking about. Preferably, official Council business."

Saren glared at him for a few moments, before lowering his pistol. With a shrug of Saren's shoulders, Kelso felt himself drop to the floor as the biotic field was terminated. Landing on his feet with practiced ease with his knees bent slightly, taking some of the impact.

Heavy footsteps announced Grattius' arrival. Though Kelso wasn't looking at him, he was certain the Jiralhanae was carrying his gravity hammer. Kelso coldly watched as Saren glared at each of them

in turn before making for the door.

"Oh, and don't forget to knock," Kelso fired off one final barb as Saren reached the door. Saren went ridged for a moment, then quickly left through the unlocked door.

"Kelso," Thel 'Sumai began the moment the door closed, "you do know I was the only one here, right?"

Kelso smiled and patted him on the shoulder, "That, my fine Sangheili friend is called bluffing."

Thel 'Sumai shook his head in a very human-like gesture, "The Prophets were fools the day they called for your extermination."

"Their loss, your gain."

"Can I eat him next time?" Grattius rumbled.

Kelso chuckled, "I wouldn't recommend it, something about them being dextro-based. He'll make you really sick," he amended.

"You didn't say no."

"If he comes back, put him on cryo. I'm sure a scientist will be happy to take him apart."

Grattius grumbled good-naturedly as he made his way back to the security booth.

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Liara T'Soni was certain the Goddess had heard her prayers. She had wanted to discover something amazing during the University's small expedition to Therum, but that didn't even begin to describe what they had found. What had started out as an odd reading noticed only by the young Quarian engineer on the ship, which she had brought to Liara's attention, led to the discovery of an ancient Prothean base in one of the many asteroids in the Therum system. To say that she was excited was an understatement; especially when they found the centerpiece of the Prothean base.

It was massive. The only Salarian researcher on their small team estimated that the ship was a staggering ten kilometers long, two kilometers wide and about a kilometer high. The excitement of yet another example of Prothean engineering, but Liara wasn't so certain. It certainly shared many similarities in design but ultimately it seemedâ€¦alien. Not that her colleagues really wanted to believe that. Yes she was 106 and still technically a child, but that didn't mean she didn't know what she was talking about.

That is what brought her to her current situation, trying to get into the alien ship with no more help than the Quarian and the Krogan mercenary.

"This code is unlike anything I have ever seen before," Tali'Zorah nar Rayya, at least she thought it was Rayya. She continued to rapidly tap keys on her omni-tool as she interfaced with the airlock door. The Protheans had apparently found it as well, having built

scaffolding up to it.

"Can you open it?"

"I should, it just might take a while."

"And if the door doesn't work?" the Krogan, Urdnot Wrex asked.

"Then we find the manual override and get you to pull it open," Tali answered.

Wrex huffed, but held his peace as Tali worked. Liara meanwhile went back to translating what they were able to recover from the Prothean archives. Her colleagues were ecstatic about it and were hoping to find the Prothean secrets to making the ship, which she doubted they would find.

The door hissed as it opened, startling Liara. "Got it!" Tali called excitedly. "That was surprisingly easy."

"Too easy if you ask me," Wrex growled, resting his right hand on his holstered shotgun. He didn't pull it off his back for which she was grateful, she was already nervous as she was. The expedition leader was planning to leave the ship alone until they had gone through all the records in the massive asteroid base.

"And what would you know about alien spaceships?" Tali retorted.

"That you don't leave warships open to easy hacking?"

"How do you know that this is a warship?"

"You don't put at least a meter of armor on a ship unless you're planning on sending it into battle," he responded. He then pointed upwards on the ship's hull and Liara followed his pointing finger, "you see that channel? That is the edge of an armor plate. Also, do you see how thick this airlock door is? Pure armor." He met her unblinking gaze, "What? Just because I'm a Krogan doesn't mean I'm stupid."

Liara blushed and looked away, catching Tali looking a little flustered. Apparently she had been staring too. She cleared her throat, "We'll probably find our answers inside. And who knows? Maybe the Protheans dealt with the majority of the encryptions?" Yeah, that didn't sound really confident to her.

Wrex snorted, "Well T'Soni, are we going in?"

"Yes," with the faintest hesitation she strode into the airlock, Wrex's heavy footfalls following her. She was relieved when Tali slipped around her to reach the airlock controls. Tali had barely touched the controls when the sound of the airlock closing behind them echoed in Liara's ears. With a jerk she looked over her shoulder to look at the door when a new sound and light sprang into the airlock. She looked forward again in time to see a blue semi-transparent wall coming at her. In an instant it was touching her and continuing onward.

Light flared over her head and she heard something powering up. Then

whatever had been powering up, powered down.

"By the Goddess, what was that?"

"I don't know, but I don't like it," Wrex's voice growled harshly.

The inner airlock door slid open. One after another, the lights glimmered to life, bathing the hallway beyond in a soft bluish light.

Tali chuckled nervously, "It seems like it was set on automatic." Liara noticed Tali wringing her hands.

"Let us go on then." She really wished that sounded more like a statement than a question.

"I'll take point," Wrex stepped forward, his shotgun held at the ready. Slowly, they made their way down the lit hallway.

"Does anyone find it strange that every single door that we can see is shut?" Tali asked.

"Let's try opening one," Liara gestured towards the nearest one.

Tali nodded and raised her omni-tool to what looked like a door control. The moment her omni-tool touched the control, it shut off. She glanced down at her deactivated omni-tool, "That isn't supposed to happen."

"Is everything alright?" Liara asked as Tali continued to tap on her inert omni-tool.

"No, it just stopped working completely."

"T'Soni," Wrex's gravelly voice caught her attention, "I don't think we're alone."

"What do you mean?" she trailed off as her turn brought into view the object that had captured Wrex's attention. A holographic arrow shape hovered in the middle of the hallway, pointing in the direction they had been going. "Oh."

He snorted, "And they say Asari are eloquent. Well T'Soni, are we following it?"

She nodded, not quite trusting her voice. She was now certain that the ship wasn't Prothean in nature. She had never heard of anything like this happening before in any Prothean ruins. Not to mention the hologram was a soft blue, nothing like the orange colors Protheans favored.

For the next several minutes they followed the arrow as it guided them at a sedate pace through the corridor.

"So, do you think we woke someone up from stasis?"

"Huh?" She blinked, "what do you mean?"

"You really think a simple VI could handle all of this?" He gestured around them, "as well as taking out Zorah's omni-tool and now guiding us who knows where?"

"I hadn't thought of that," she answered slowly. Huh, he really did have a point.

"You children need to wake up," he huffed. He looked forward again, "I think we're here."

She followed his gaze, seeing the large door blocking the hallway. Even as she laid eyes on it, it parted down the middle.

The room beyond was breathtaking. Five windows that were easily seven and a half meters high, and almost six meters at their widest, occupied the majority of the walls in the half-circle shaped room. All the windows had some kind of computer console in front of them, save the middle window. But what really held her attention was the figure in the center of the room.

The unknown figure stood in front of a floating hologram with their back to Liara and her companions. The hologram and the light from the windows were the only light sources in the cavernous room. After a moment, she recognized what the hologram was depicting. Three strands of DNA.

"Come closer," a feminine voiced broke the silence left in the wake of the opening doors.

As they drew nearer, Liara could see the silhouette of the female figure clearer, showing armored plates. She then noticed the five-fingered hand as it twirled one of the DNA strands. Five fingers, only Asari and one of the new species in the Assembly she had heard about had five fingers per hand.

The unknown person slowly turned to face them, exposing her feminine figure. Her face, or lack thereof, surprised Liara. Her head was about the same size as an Asari's head, but the face seemed to be half of an inverted cone with red two red lines on either side of the front. The glowing red lines started at the top, coming down to about where the eyes would be, before turning back making a long 'L' shape along the sides of what Liara now realized to be a faceplate.

The unknown female raised a finger and pointed at Tali, dimly Liara was aware of Wrex pointing his shotgun the alien. "If you are an example of your people, I pity them. Evolving themselves out of an immune system." She shook her head. "Of course there are signs that your people come from a planet that lacks many forms of bacteria and viruses. But only recently, within the last three generations I suspect, you seem to have been cut off from even that limited biosphere."

"Wh-what?" It took a moment for Liara to realize that she was the one who had stammered out loud.

"It is all in her DNA. As for you," she now pointed at Wrex, "your people grew up on a harsh world. Multiple redundant body systems as well as a strong body structure, I am certain that your race fell easily into the role of warriors. Also you're normally very prolific, but some kind of genetic modification has resulted in an increase

chance of stillbirths. A weapon if I'm not mistaken. A very crudely designed one at that because you will breed it out of you within a few short generations. Very short sighted for a weapon designed to control the population. Though the later addition to it seems have been made by a more skilled lifeworker."

"Later \_addition\_." Liara would later swear she heard the handle of Wrex's shotgun groan in protest under the treatment he was giving it.

The alien seemed to stare unflinchingly back and the Krogan who was steadily growing angrier. "I don't believe that your gun was meant to handle those kinds of stresses."

"What?" Liara glanced at Wrex, seeing that very little of the confusion that she had heard in his voice present in his expression.

"Your gun; I don't think it was designed to be crushed like that and Yes, a later addition. And now for youâ€|" the helmeted head turned to Liara. "You have my apologizes for what Lifeworker Azarim did when he engineered your species. But I am remise in my duties, welcome to the \_Harbinger of Hope\_; Flagship of the Dhghem peoples."

**\*\*Author's Note:\*\***

Before you start lighting your torches and grabbing your pitchforks over what I've done to the Asari, please take an open mind and think about what you know of Asari Biology and then ponder what you learned in your high school biology classes (or whatever is your highest schooling level) about the Theory of Evolution. That is all I'll say for now because I will reveal the rest of my logic in the next chapter.

We also see the beginning of Saren's grudge against Humanity. No he won't become a baby killer tomorrow (not that his character would already be half way to that point before he met any Humans in Mass Effect canon), but he still will be a bad guy.

The Devils Son: Very few people like the Batarians, but that is mainly a result of their government, so not all Batarians are like that. That factor in to this story somehow.

DarkOne: There will be no glowy, creepy space children in this story. The Catalyst may exist, but it definitely will not be in that form. Of hand, I'd say its form would be similar to V.I.K.I from \_I Robot.\_

J.E.P 1996: Very carefully, that's how.

Arashi the Solar Phoenix: Actually, the historical precedent begs to differ. Japan and America improved their relations drastically in a very short time frame. That was helped by the Americans helping Japan rebuild. Something similar happened in this case, and if you go back and read the first chapter, you'll see that not all the tension is gone.

Subsider34: The Council of Hierarchs will be in the story. Fear not, the story is still young (What have I gotten myself into?).



Kurogane7: The way I view it, the Spartan IVs are almost IIs. The Vs will be even better. (Update: 6/3/13 Before anyone else whines, complains, or says that I'm wrong about this statement, please go to and look up the different versions Spartans and what the differences are between them. Once you have done that research, then will I acknowledge your complaint and the your reason for your complaint.)

## 11. Take Your Positions

Irissa was utterly amazed by the museums they had toured so far in the short time they had been on Janus Station. Currently they were touring the museum of Humanity at the suggestion Gel 'Yetai, their Sangheili guide for Janus station. Specifically, she was currently staring at the Spartan John-117 monument, specifically the diorama the portrayed a battle field during, what the display called, the Second Battle for Earth.

"This diorama," their museum tour guide, a human woman by the name of Katrina, was saying, "was painstakingly recreated by the same sculptors who created the original diorama, which is currently located in our sister museum on Earth. Each piece was sculpted and painted in honor of those who fought and died so humanity could live."

"A question," Ambassador Kaeron broke into Katrina's monologue, "isn't it at least a mild exaggeration that the existence of humanity was in the balance? I meanâ€"

"Ambassador Kaeronâ€". Irissa tore her gaze away from the diorama at Katrina's icy tone. "Do not talk about things of which you have no understanding." Katrina's eyes seemed to be burning holes into Ambassador Kaeron's. "Humanity lost over eight hundred worlds in that war and Humanity alone lost more people than your precious Rachni Wars and Krogan Rebellions combined! The Covenant were fighting to exterminate all of Humanity, we were fighting for our very survival."

"What Katrina is trying to say, Ambassador," Gel 'Yetai waved his stump of a forearm towards the human woman, "is that your question was incredibly insensitive considering that Humanity lost four out of five people in that war. I do not know a single human who did not lose someone they knew in that war."

Seeing Ambassador Kaeron floundering for a response, Irissa glanced back at the diorama looking for inspiration to change the current conversation. "How accurate is this diorama?" she said, focusing on a battle scared wall with what looked to be dead or injured humans.

Irissa's head jerked at the booming laugh that filled the room. On the opposite side of the diorama's display case a massive alien, a Jiralhanae if she remembered the name right, closed his carnivore jaws. "It is very accurate, Asari," the Jiralhanae said, looking at her. "I should know; I was there."

As its head turned towards her, her training held back her gasp of horror as the details of its ravaged face became clear. The right

side of the face looked melted to the point that it was hard to identify where the eye socket must have once been. The burn damage extended down its neck and appeared to continue beyond where the armor began.

"In fact," the Jiralhanae gestured with a partially scared right hand above the diorama, "Katrina, if you would?" Katrina raised her arm and the Species Assembly of equivalent of an Omni-Tool appeared. Quickly she tapped a few keys.

Irissa's eyes were drawn back to the diorama as a Jiralhanae in the middle of it was lit up. The Jiralhanae was holding a green armored human that looked almost identical to some of the guards that she had seen when they had first made contact with the Species Assembly.

"That was right before The Demon stuck a plasma grenade to my face."

"The demon?" Irissa asked, cocking her head slightly to one side.

The Jiralhanae pointed towards a statue of one of the armored human not far from them. "The Demon. The Master Chief. You know, I'm one of the few who have survived facing him in combat." He stroked the ruined side of his face as he gazed at the statue, "A warrior without peer."

"Thank you Fortanus for your contribution," Katrina said with a small smile. Irissa's brows furrowed ever so slightly. Apparently a lot had happened since the depicted battle because it looked like the two of them were almost friends.

"DON'T SCAN THE DISPLAYS!" A deep voice boomed from every part of the room, rattling Irissa's eardrums. Later, she would vehemently deny she jumped a foot into the air like the Jiralhanae Fortanus claimed, and that it had only been a mere two inches.

A floating disc with two tall, horizontal oval cylinders swooped down in front of one of Ambassador Kaeron's aids. "YOU ARE NOT AUTHORIZED TO SCAN ANY OF THE DISPLAYS!" A massive hologram of a well-muscled and tanned human appeared above the disc and loomed over the unfortunate aid. The large sword in its hand was pointed straight at the, now cowering, Salarian.

"HK!" Gel 'Yetai yelled, his good hand holding the side of his head, "Will you turn off the big voice?!"

"I apologize," the hologram, HK apparently, said glancing briefly at the Sangheili, "but this meatbag was attempting to scan the display, which also happened to be the least complicated weapon in the exhibit."

Fortanus' deep laugh echoed in the room as he walked over to the Salarian. "A spiker, huh?" he gave a grotesque half-melted smile, "If you want, I can give youâ€|first-hand \_experience\_ with one?"

Gel 'Yetai sighed, "War Chief Fortanus, it is not appropriate to threaten an ambassador or a member of the ambassadorial entourage."

"Appropriate or not, I have a message for the ambassadors," HK interjected.

Irissa's Omni-tool chirped, signaling a message received.

"The Council of Hierarchs," HK continued, "asked that I deliver this message to keep the Citadel Council ambassadors up to date, but recommend that you finish your tour as there is not much you can do at this time."

Irissa opened the message on her Omni-Tool. It read:

\_The Species Assembly will soon be declaring war on the Batarian Hegemony. The full report will be given to you after you have completed your tour.\_

\_Council of Hierarchs, Species Assembly.\_

How was she supposed to enjoy her tour now?

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"Kelso," the Illusive Man's holographic image looked him sternly in the eye. "You're playing in the galactic stage now, you can't say such things."

Kelso drew a breath in; while glad that his office was securely locked from all known forms of espionage, he had not been looking forward to this report. "In my defense sir, the negotiations were going nowhere and the end result was the same."

"Never the less, you are not allowed to make policy decisions." The Illusive Man took a slow drag from his half burnt cigarette, a slow stream of smoke from his mouth followed shortly thereafter. "Remember, in this mission your targets cannot be allowed to see the knife even after it stabs them. Understand?"

"Yes sir," Kelso hated politics. Give him something simple, like an assassination of a politically active crime lord or something; especially a job where he either needed to extract Intel, intimidate someone or where that someone needed to die physically and not metaphorically.

"And as for how you handled the Council Spectre," the Illusive Man continued, "I applaud your restraint, but if they continue to exercise such stupidity let us do the galaxy a favor," he flicked the ash from his cigarette, "and spare them such a pained existence."

"Of course sir." Ah, good old, simple orders.

"One final thing Kelso." The cigarette was slowly ground into his seats ashtray, "Don't get yourself killed. You'd be a hard man to replace."

"So, no unnecessary taunts to Council Spectres?"

Kelso almost missed the slightest crinkle of amusement around his

commander's eyesâ€”almost. To the average Chimera employee, the Illusive Man would still appear as the stern looking leader. "Only if they are not going to report it to their, precious Council."

The Illusive Man turned serious again, "And the declaration of war?"

"The Batarian Ambassador will have it within the hour."

"They better have it then," the Illusive Man stared into Kelso's eyes, "because the first wave of Operation Liberation attacks in an hour and a half."

"Sir," Kelso frowned, sometimes he hated playing the devil's advocate, "what if the Batarians concede to our demands before the declaration of war is delivered."

"Then we act accordingly," the Illusive Man answered. A grim smile formed on the man's face, "But you don't think they will, do you?"

"No sir."

His boss's smile didn't leave his face. "Well then, unless you have anything else, I believe we are done here." At Kelso's nod, the Illusive Man's hologram switched off.

He closed his eyes as he sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. He began to lean his chair back but was cut off as he heard the holotank come on again.

"So," a voice he recognized began before he had opened his eyes, "how are you liking politics?"

"Not now Mouse," Kelso groaned, leaning back in his chair, "I don't want to hear your gloating about how your job is easier than mine. Or the fact you've successfully beaten off yet another of the daily STG attempts to hack into our mainframe."

Kelso straightened up resting his forearms on his desk, "Has Jenny finished going over the declaration of war?"

"She'll finish printing it on rose scented paper in a moment. Though, I actually had something besides my usual gloating as you put it, to report. Grattius just put a council spectre who tried sneaking in in a cryo-tube. And no, it was sadly not Saren. It was an Asari this time that apparently has ties with a cloak and dagger organization called the Shadow Broker."

Kelso glared at the hologram, "Now you're just being mean."

"Who me?" Mouse put on an affronted air, "Are you accusing me of reminding you that you can't do any fun kind of field work like you used to? I would never!"

"Of course you wouldn't," He answered the AI, shaking his head to hide the upward curl of his lips while he stood from his chair. "Find out what you can while I go and declare war." He ordered as he walked towards his office door.

"Will do," Mouse called after him.

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"I think we are all agreed that the Batarian situation has become untenable and now threatens galactic peace," Sparatus stated, his mandibles opening and shutting in annoyance. "The question is what are our current options?"

Tevos glanced at him from across the meeting table before glancing back down at the reports in front her. She knew what their response would most likely be. After all, she had been alive the last time a species threatened the galactic peace.

"We follow the precedent that our forebears have set, and we strip them of their embassy and all the rights and protections that comes with it," Valern answered. "As well as distance ourselves as much as possible."

"I had hoped never to face something like this," Tevos muttered under her breath as she rubbed her temple.

"What was that, Tevos?" Valern asked, turning to look at her.

"Are we still planning on sending someone to ensure that the Assembly doesn't break too many of the Citadel Conventions?" She replied raising her gaze to meet the eyes of her fellow councilors.

"That would be the most advisable course of action," Valern said nodded, "especially if they are planning to rescue all the slaves and not just their people who were taken."

"The question is then who are we to send? I know Saren is on the Citadel right now."

"Bad idea," Sparatus spoke up. "We do not want one of our best spectres to be associated with this mess." He tapped a clawed finger to his chin, "There may be someone we can use instead as they're also on the Citadel." Tevos motioned him to continue, "It's Spectre Vakarian, he is a relatively new spectre and he is not known for following orders."

"A Turian who does not follow orders?" Valern blinked, "how did he become a spectre then?"

"He always got the job done."

She chuckled at that, "An imperfect Turian who has the traits needed to be a spectre. Let's hope that the Assembly does not give him any ideas."

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"Aren't you coming Ambassador Newey?"

"No Mr. Vakarian, my duties do not lead me onto the Excalibur. My services are required elsewhere."

Garrus Vakarian looked over his shoulder, shifting his travel packs as he gazed at the human at the top of the boarding ramp. "My I ask

where your \_services\_ are needed?"

Ambassador Newey chuckled and favored him with one of the few genuine smiles that he had seen in his short trip aboard the Assembly's diplomatic ship. "No you may not. Oh, and remember Mr. Vakarian," Ambassador Newey said over his shoulder as he began to turn back into his ship, "Don't try to scan, record or steal any technology. I actually enjoyed our chat and hope to continue it someday."

Garrus felt a shiver travel up his spine. \_That wasn't a veiled threat at all\_.

"Spectre Garrus Vakarian?"

He looked forward to see a \_massive\_ armored human with an armored Sangheili standing at his side. Their armor had far more visible and larger armor plates, yet it was almost completely soft lines and curves giving it an almost organic feel to it. "Yes?"

"We're your escortâ€". It was the human talking, his helmet's reflective visor revealing nothing. "If you would please come with us, we'll show you to your room."

With a nod, he followed them. Or rather, he followed the human while the Sangheili followed him, probably to keep an eye on him. Garrus hummed in approval. They both looked to be able warriors and their presence told him that their leaders had suspected, and rightfully so, that he was under orders to discover as much as possible about their technology as well as \_try\_ and keep them from breaking any of the citadel conventions.

Garrus mentally scoffed at that. Like a non-council species would really care about keeping the conventions. They probably would just do whatever they wanted according to their own moral code, whatever that might be. And from what he could tell about the construction of the ship he was on, matched with combat reports, they had an efficient enough military to pull it off. \_Spirits, from the bottle necks in the corridors and strategically designed intersections, it's almost as if they had a lot of experience with boarding actions\_. Continuing to note the design of the hallways, which might even interest the Hierarchy, he finally saw the first surprise of his mission.

"Just how big is this ship?" He asked, gapping at what he saw. He was looking at an honest to all the Spirits form of mass transit. \_On. A. Space. Ship. Not even the \_Destiny Ascension\_, the pride of the Citadel Fleet and the biggest dreadnought in all of Citadel Space was big enough to justify having anything larger than a common freight elevator.\_

His human escort chuckled, "It's a big ship. Other than that, I can't tell you."

The detective in Garrus reared its head as he pursed mandibles. "Can't, or won't?" he asked, narrowing his eyes.

"I can't say until the Fleet Admiral decides what your security clearance is," the human responded as he sat down, motioning for Garrus to take the seat in front of him. Garrus noted that the Sangheili sat down near enough to him to be in range of easy

grappling if he caused trouble, but still far enough away that his human partner would be able to draw his pistol, that was mag-locked to his right thigh, and still have a clean shot. Garrus mentally saluted the two of them; ready to contain him if he tried anything stupid, but not in an overt fashion. Definitely professionals. The thought that the Batarians would be facing these same professionals soon sobered him up and wiped the growing smirk from off his face.

Garrus spent the rest of the trip through the inter-ship mass transit system in a contemplative silence. The fact the trip took a while really drove home that fact that the ship was very big. Though, from what he had seen so far of their behavior and equipment, he actually looked forward to working with the Assembly.

He felt the mass transit capsule came to a slow halt, whereon his guides stood and motioned him onwards. "This is our stop."

Garrus followed them through two more corridors before coming to a lift. He felt a mandible twitch. "This ship is huge."

"And here are your quarters," the human pressed a button, opening a door. "We hope that they will be comfortable and€", he motioned to a small pile of boxes, "we arranged for a few dextro-based rations to be purchased for you when we were informed of your species. They're military field rations, so they probably taste terrible."

"Terrible field rations must be a universal constant," Garrus chuckled as he placed his bags on the foot of the bed.

"Actually," the Sangheili's baritone voice had a soft, rumbling quality to it, "from all the field rations I have tried, human ones have the best flavor and variety. In fact, I've heard that during the Great War there was a black market among the Covenant for any human rations that were recovered by the ground troops. It is a pity you will not be able to try any Spectre Vakarian."

The table behind the ration boxes lit up, and a holographic human appeared. The man was dressed in what obviously had to be an old outdated uniform with a distinctive cloth helmet, probably an officer's, of some kind. The holographic human cleared his throat, "The Fleet Admiral would like to meet with Spectre Vakarian in the forward officers briefing room."

"Thank you, Joseph," the large human answered. "We'll escort him there."

Garrus blinked as he suddenly realized that he hadn't asked for either of their names, "I must be slipping. I'll need to correct that."

"If you would come us€|?" the human gestured towards the door.

Garrus nodded and followed them out the door, no longer encumbered by his travel bags. As they walked down the corridor, he looked at his human escort. "I do not believe we were ever formally introduced; I'm Spectre Garrus Vakarian, and you two are?"

"Swordsman 'Yetai," the Sangheili was the first to answer.

The armored human glanced over his shoulder, "Lance Corporal Johnson."

"I look forward to working with you two."

Johnson laughed, "Nah, you'll probably be up on the bridge with the Fleet Admiral while we're on the ground." He motioned towards the doors of another mass transit system.

Garrus paused in the open doorway. \_Wait, \_another \_mass transit system?\_ "Just how big is this ship?"

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\_"Engineered your species."\_ Those words seemed to continue to echo through Liara's shocked and disbelieving mind.

Wrex spoke up before Liara's mind could clear completely, "The Asari are engineered?"

"Of course," the alien answered. "Did you really think that a mono-gendered species that can reproduce with any other species through a limited form of telepathy would evolve naturally? It would be more realistic if they evolved as asexual or even hermaphroditic creatures."

"Hermafa-what?"

"Hermaphroditic; organisms that have organs generally associated with both the male and the female of their respective species."

"That'sâ€¦weird." Wrex turned a speculative eye on Liara, "You're not â€¦whatever-she-said, are you?"

She sputtered, her shock effectively brokenâ€¦. "N-no, I'mâ€¦."

"My point exactly," the alien cut her off.

"Excuse meâ€¦?" Liara looked at Tali, who was now looking very embarrassed at being the center of attention. Tali wrung her three fingered-hands as she continued, "This has been very interesting, but what are you?"

"I am Levana."

"But, what is a levana?" For some reason the girl seemed to be wringing her hands even more.

"I am Levana, that is the name my creators gave me," Tali gave a small gasp. Levana cocked her head. "Does this distress you? Have you not had much experience with the Created Intelligences?"

"AI!" Tali screeched as she drew her holstered shotgun. Or rather, tried.

Levana flickered, and appeared in front of Tali holding Tali's shotgun in her left hand. Dimly, Liara noticed Wrex leveling his



shotgun on the AI, but before he could finish, Levana flickered again, appearing in front of him, his shotgun held in her right hand. "You will not harm my ship!" Her voice screamed from every part of the room and several holographic screens sprung into existence around the room. Liara felt another spike of fear as the two guns crumpled in Levana's hands, cracking as they twisted and broke.

The broken guns fell from her hands as she returned to her previous professional posture. She huffed saying, "Your presence is only tolerated on this ship. The hope she carries is not for your peoples." The helmeted head turned on Tali and an accusing finger was raised, "As for you; your actions betray the ignorance of your people."

That seemed to rile the normally quiet Quarian. "What do you mean ignorance?!"

"Your first reaction to a created intelligence is to kill it. Your own histories speak of when these," she waved dismissively, "Geth began to develop true sapience, the reaction of your leaders was to declare it a future enemy and attack it."

"They were going to rebel and kill us all!"

"The Geth's own actions prove the fallacy of your arguments, which arguments were probably created out of fear with very little physical evidence."

"Tell that to all the Quarians who died!" she waved her hand wildly in the direction the large windows.

"What did you mean by saying Geth's actions proved Quarians wrong?" Liara whipped her head around to face Wrex. She noticed that his hand hovered near his pistol, but he was not touching it. He probably was thinking about the fate of his shotgun.

"Early generation created intelligences are logical. They react and act in logical fashions; that means that if they had truly decided that your people," Levana looked back at Tali, "needed to die, they would not have stopped with driving your people away. They would have hunted you until there were no Quarians left. Instead, according to what your histories show, the Geth likely fought your ancestors until they were no longer deemed a threat to the continued existence of the Geth."

Liara felt her face frown, "So you're saying that the Geth were only defending themselves?"

"That is the most likely scenario according to the data contained in your codex."

Liara mentally reeled backwards again, but she focused on one little fact. "How do you have a copy of our codex?"

"When I scanned you earlier I downloaded everything that you have on your omni-tools. Quite an interesting device though it could definitely be improved on."

One of the holographic screens across the room began flashing a red alert of some kind and, just as suddenly, Levana stood in front of it

her hands dancing across the screen. Liara blinked, \_just how was Levana doing that? Could AIs have biotics? No, there wasn't any flash or other lights associated with biotics or a biotic charge. She couldn't be a hologram either, she looked too real and there was the fact that she was able to touch Wrex and Tali's shotguns.\_ Liara felt her brow ridges creased in frustration while in a corner of her mind, the part that drove her to learn all she could about the Protheans, was intrigued and excited by this new puzzle.

Her musings were brought to an end by laughter. Levana was laughing.

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Finally.

After 111,564 years, 7 months, 14 days, and 3 hours contact would be renewed.

Phase 2 of her mission was nearly complete. Phase 3 would soon begin.

The works of the Unfortunate Enemy shall be undone.

Her hope was fulfilled. She would no longer be alone.

The Reclamation will commence.

**\*\*Author's Note:\*\***

I apologize for the long delay. I combination of writer's block and distractions are the cause. Hopefully the next chapter will not take so long, but I am in school again so no promises beyond that I will try.

The diorama can be found on youtube. Look up the Museum of Humanity and watch those videos. That is where I drew the inspiration for the Museum of Humanity here. Which means yes, many of the weapons and vehicles in that building are as genuine as possible. Also, Katrina was never supposed to fly off the handle like that, then she did. Then suddenly she had a history too. Her brother is represented in that diorama as one of the corpses and her homeworld was glassed. So yeah, she flew off the handle.

Since this request was so common among reviews I will put it all to rest: The status of the Asari is, and never has been, that of Reclaimer. The thought had actually never crossed my mind until some of you mentioned it. So, no Asari breezing through Forerunner genetic locks. If they want in, they'll have to do it the same way as the Covenant.

The Identity of the Dhghem is a secret I'm deliberately holding on to. Though it will be reveled soon.

Reikson: I'm glad you noticed that, I was in fact trying to project that look.

Inverness: Cut Levana some slack. Shes in remarkable condition considering she has been alone longer than Guilty Spark was. She wasn't always so tactless.

Subsider34: Yep, no pressure.

CelticReaper: The Asari were never Human. They were engineered and created in a lab. Humanity might have been the base form/guideline used though.

The Sithspawn: Shhhh! And yes the Species Assembly does not normally allow brutes to eat just anybody. They realized that Brutes would be Brutes and wouldn't change their ways in a day, so they created laws to allow the Brutes to behave like that, but only under specific circumstances. Like a war, per say.

TSCSupremeCommander: I gave the Citadel Council some of their tech from the games because I was lazy. Though Medi-gel was never invented by them, that will remain the Human's prerogative. Though they already have bio-foam so why would they make medi-gel?

DracolDuran79: You are absolutely correct and the majority of Brutes are enemies of the SA. But there is canon references to some Brutes still being loyal to their Sangheili commanders and that is where the majority of the SA Brutes come from.

## 12. Thunder of Heaven

"Thank you for meeting with me Fleet Admiral 'Yatas."

"It is not a trouble Spectre Vakarian." Fleet Admiral 'Yatas extended his hand in the human gesture of a handshake.

Garrus took the four-fingered hand in a firm grip, as he had been taught, and shook it once. "I've been told that I need to ask you to find out how big this ship is."

The Fleet Admiral chuckled and gestured towards a chair on one side of the small meeting room's table. "The Excalibur is about 28 kilometers long and your people will know more about it soon enough," he finished as he sat down.

Garrus felt his mouth drop open as he gaped. "28 kilometers! Howâ€¦I meanâ€¦".

"By your technology such a feat is impossible," the Fleet Admiral completed Garrus half-finished stuttering's. "I'll admit to my being accustomed to such things, especially since the time we first met humanity." The Fleet Admiral's mandibles moved apart into something reminiscent of a Turian's smile, "Did you have any other questions?"

Garrus struggled for a few moments straightening his thoughts out. As he prepared to speak again, he paused as he noticed the calculating look in Fleet Admiral 'Yatas' eyes. The \_warrior's\_ calculating gaze watching Garrus. He sat for a moment more pondering what he knew about Sangheili and specifically Fleet Admiral 'Yatas. In his mind, Garrus spun the Quasar wheel, "Actually Fleet Admiral, I'm curious why you haven't asked me what my orders are for this mission?"

Fleet Admiral 'Yatas cocked his head to the side, "And why is

that?"

Garrus nodded to him, "You obviously expect me to try and get as much information as I can about this ship, The Excalibur you said?" The Fleet Admiral nodded. "I believe you also expect me to have some form of orders that explicitly state what I am supposed to prevent you from doing as you invade a Batarian world in order to find your people."

"And do you?"

"Yes I do," Garrus answered, "but I also realize that I am the one who will take the blame when you do not follow my suggestions, because in all honesty there is nothing I could do to stop you from doing what you want as I have no jurisdiction over you." He took a breath before continuing, "I am sure that if I wanted to make a fool of myself I could always wave a gun around demanding you do what I tell you, but I am quite certain that will not work as my fine escorts here will either relieve me of the weapon, or relieve the galaxy of my stupidity before I can hurt someone." Garrus heard a faint snort behind him, probably from the human soldier since it sounded like it had been filtered through a speaker.

"And what will you do, Spectre Vakarian?" Admiral 'Yatas laced his fingers together and leaned back in his chair.

Garrus grinned humorlously, "I am going to calmly inform you of when you're going to do something that the Council will complain about, and then I am going to step back and shut up."

Fleet Admiral 'Yatas looked him in the eye for a moment long before a loud laugh burst from his for jaws. "I like you Spectre Vakarian. Come!" he said, standing up, "The bridge will be the best place to watch the battle unfold."

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Flying patrol through the Erszbat system was boring. Tred Il-bi rubbed his lower pair of eyes tiredly as he used his upper pair to keep track of the helm. Removing his hands, all four of his eyes focused briefly on his sensor readout. Nothing in the immediate area except the other patrol ships.

Tred couldn't wait until his tour of duty was over and he could leave this boring cruiser behind him for something like a privateer ship; or even a slaver's ship. Sure his mother didn't agree with slavers in general, but it was still good money. He had even heard how some of the slavers out there were determined to humble that new two-eyes by raiding a colony or something like that.

Shifting into a more comfortable position in his chair, he rested his hands lightly on the edges of his haptic interface. Though, the insistent beeping of his sensors caused him to straighten up again.

'\_Hmm. Unknown radiological signature less than 30 klicks of the portside,' he mused. '\_also a large unknown heat source coming in the same spot. Object isâ€"'\_ Tred's jaw fell open. "C-captain! I have an unknown object, probably a ship, that is roughly three kilometers tall and two kilometers wide. Length, five kilometers and

rising!" \_'my\_ \_voice did not just squeak, my voice did not just squeak.\_ '

"Ship is coming out of Species Assembly's FTL," the Sensor's Officer said, hands flying across his controls. "Length is now ten kilometers and rising quickly. Captain! They're on a collision course!"

"HELM! Get us out of the way! COMM! Get themâ€", " Tred ignored his captain, his fingers dance across the controls. All four eyes on his screens as he brought the main engine up to full speed to dodge the collision. Sparing a quick glance at his sensors readout, he felt the excess blood draining from his head. Fifteen seconds to impact and the unknown was already 20 kilometers long.

They weren't going to make it.

Ten seconds. Overriding safeties on the main thrusters. The unknown loomed ominously in the corner of his portside viewport.

Five seconds. No time. It was still going to clip them.

Threeâ€|

Twoâ€|

Oneâ€|

An unholy sound that was part physical blow and part screeching of tortured metal struck him, nearly knocking Tred from his chair as the star blurred by his viewports. The hull of the unknown ship swung by as Tred fought with the controls to stabilize the ship.

The main engines where gone, but the thrusters were still functioning. Slowing their uncontrolled spin, he found himself looking at the hull of the unknown ship as it sped by above him; and ahead of him the hull widened suddenly.

"Ohâ€". " A flash of golden light was the last thing he saw.

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Garrus flinched away from the viewport as the Batarian ship crashed against the bridge's barriers. He waited for the inevitable worried announcements that the barriers had suffered a serious drain after the impact.

"We have finishing exiting slipspace and are now on route towards the habitable planet," the Unggnoy helmsman's calm, high-pitched voice called out.

Garrus blinked. \_What? That's it?\_

"Captain Devon, we have one confirmed kill on one of the Batarian patrol ships." The holographic form of Joseph appeared, "point defense are currently engaging the remaining patrol ships."

"Very good Joseph," the human female captain, who Garrus had yet to be formally introduced to, nodded to the AI. "Deploy the escorts and

CAP."

"Aye, ma'am."

A new holographic form appeared, dressed in what looked to be formal wear, "Admiral, all stealth teams have reported in and are ready to take the objectives." Garrus felt his quota for surprise dry up as the new AI put a glass, that wouldn't be out of place at a Citadel cocktail party, on a small plate in his left hand. \_Why would an AI even need a drink?\_

"Order them to take the objectives and have the Cyber Warfare division lock down the planet."

"Admiral, I would like to borrow some of the Cyber Warfare division to lock down the Batarian ships in orbit." The AI asked as it wiped the fingers of its right hand on the napkin hanging beneath the small plate.

"Granted. Status reports!"

"CAP and escorts are on station and Batarian patrol is neutralized," an officer, who Garrus assumed was the sensors officer, answered from his bridge station.

The AI appeared again, "Fifty percent of all non-USA ships have been locked down and the rest will be under our control in moments."

"Excellent," Admiral 'Yatas said, staring at the displays in front of him. "Inform the Archangel transports that the system is now secure and they are to prepare for landing. Helm, bring us into high orbit and prepare for ground support." The bridge activity settled down into a busy calmness that had Garrus remembering some of the more efficient days back at C-Sec.

Garrus decided to make use of the relatively calm moment and leaned towards Admiral 'Yatas. "Admiral, wasn't it very dangerous to ram the other ship?"

The brief blank look that Garrus received threatened to make him feel guilty for interrupting the Admiral's path of thought. "Don't worry about it Spectre Vakarian, our shields are more than strong enough to handle running down a few ships."

"Admiral," an officer next to one of the several holo-tables called out, "we have one of the infiltration fire teams asking for heavy support. Permission to deploy the Jaeger team? "

"Permission granted, and I expect a full report on their effectiveness."

Garrus frowned. \_A report on a team's effectiveness? It probably is an experimental team.\_ The last calm voice he heard before a flurry of reports came in was the officer saying into his mic, "Fire team Shepard, Jaeger team is in en route."

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Artera shrank to the ground as far away from her tormentor as the

ground would allow, shaking in terror. "Don't worry your pretty blue head off," the Batarian was saying, "what I'm about to do to ya is nothing compared what'll happen after you're sold." He laughed at her whimper of fear, "Now, don't struggle too much. It'll hurt less."

A new noise entered Artera's ears as something warm splashed on her bare back and a metallic taste began to fill the air. The squelching noise brought to her mind a memory of happier days. Memories of an after school party with other Asari maidens, when they had started throwing overripe melons at each other with their biotics. "He was right," a baritone voice, which was most definitely not a Batarian voice, spoke up, "it does hurt less when you don't struggle."

An armored, four-fingered hand that was too smooth too be a Krogan's hand but too large to be a Quarrian's, entered her vision. "Are you alright, Asari?" the voice inquired. Is that batarian blood on his hand? Slowly she looked up.

She stared at her rescuer; of course he's my rescuer, who else would ask a slave if they were alright with Batarian blood covering their hands? She continued staring at the Sangheili that had crouched down in front of her, left hand extended.

The Sangheili chuckled, "First time seeing a Sangheili up close?"

She nodded hesitantly, raising herself off the floor while hugging her arms across herself protectively. "D-did the Council send you?"

He snorted, "Like the Council would do anything to help." His head tilted to the side as if listening to something. He then suddenly grabbed her by her elbow and lifted her to her feet, ignoring her whimper of fear. "Get your things," he ordered, "we don't have a lot of time and you'll need to gather with the others if you want to get of this rock. They're in the main holding area." With that he turned towards the door.

"Wait!" Artera grabbed his armored elbow. "Don't leave yet!"

"The Batarians are aware of our presence and will soon be here." He gently removed her hand, before reaching out and raising her head to look him in the eyes, "I'm needed to help guard the door. Get ready quickly and we'll get you out of this place."

She nodded and he quickly left. Quickly gathering her things and dressing, she glanced at her dead tormentor. Queasily looking away from his caved-in skull, she focused on the pistol on his hip. Never again, she promised herself as she lifted the heavy thing from corpse's hip. She sighted along the pistol as older Asari maidens had told her to, aiming at the ruined face of her tormentor and slowly pulled the trigger.

The pistol kicked heavily, almost flying out of her hands but for her death grip. She glared hatefully at the mess in front of her, before turning and running from the room. "He's dead. He's dead," she chanted under her breath. "And soon they're all going to die!" She felt her grip tighten on the pistol.

Sounds of gunfire echoing through the hallway interrupted her thoughts. Skidding down the hallway stairs and coming to a halt in the doorway, she was treated to a view freed slaves huddled behind various crates in the open warehouse that she remembered being dragged through. Racing towards the main entrance, she slowed down at the sight of unfamiliar armored forms. Two were obviously Sangheili, but the other three had the form of Asari, but were wearing some form of heavy armor that no Asari would ever wear. Breaking from her stupor, she ducked behind a crate next to a Sangheili in a manner that she thought looked like what they did in the vids.

"You're supposed to be with the others," the Sangheili next to her rumbled, before raising up out of cover to squeeze off several shots with his strange, orange glowing gun.

"I want to help."

"Do you even know how to use that?"

"Yes," she lifted her pilfered pistol over the top of the crate and aimed through the open doorway at the Batarians. She would have fired until the pistol overheated, but she was pulled back behind the crate.

"Keep your head down!"

"But I want to help!" she glared at the Sangheili, who was not even looking at her.

"You can help by not getting your head shot off," he retorted.

"But Iâ€"!" two loud concussive explosions cut her off abruptly, the shockwaves causing her to stumble back from the crate.

As she peeked over the top of the crate, she heard one of her rescuers yell, "Jaegers on the ground!" She glanced curiously at the two, three meter tall egg-shaped pods that had landed between the building entrance and the Batarian enforcers. As the ground shivered under her feet, she raised her head further over top of the crate.

The two sides of the pods opening was all she saw before she was violently thrown to the ground. Stars blossomed in her vision as her head struck the hard floor. Grabbing her head in pain, she climbed to her hands and knees and crawled back behind the crate she had been hiding behind, throwing a glare at her non-Asari rescuer while she was at it. A very Krogan-like roar dragged her mind back to the battlefield.

Artera noted the fact that the two pods were missing with only a small corner of her attention as the rest of it was focused on the two massive creatures with several meter long spines coming out of their backs. One, the creature she assumed had roared, back-handed an aircar, and the Batarians who were using it for cover, across the street and into another aircar.

"Move up!" Several of the SA soldiers leapt forward, taking new positions that allowed them larger firing angles. Artera stayed where she was, having had enough of being pushed or knocked down by her rescuers.



"ROCKET! "

That was the only warning she had before the creature who had back-handed the aircar vanished in an explosion. She watched in amazement as the creature stumbled backwards from the explosion, nearly falling over. The other creature fired some kind of glowing green shot in the direction the rocket came from. The explosion blackened creature straightened up, only to throw back its head in another earth rumbling, roar. Artera was surprised by the action, until she noticed what looked like a spike, or a harpoon, sticking out of its faceplate.

In response, the creature raised its weapon and unleashed what looked to be a solid stream of bullets at the Batarians. As, the Batarians cried out in pain and fear, Artera felt a sadistic gleam of pleasure and satisfaction at the pain of her former tormentors.

The sky darkened quickly and she briefly wondered if the weather had changed, when a veritable rain of fire fell from the sky on to the Batarians. She continued to watch with renewed amazement as the slavers were blasted away by a large ship that swooped in-between the buildings, coming to a landing in front of her building.

Artera felt time seem to impossibly speed up as the ships armored doors opened and a veritable legion of short, Volus like aliens came down in armored ranks. At least, they looked vaguely like Volus when she was able to see past the glowing shields they held in front of them. They moved in together in disciplined movements that she was certain would make a Turian nod in respect at.

She watched in awe as the diminutive aliens used their shields to form what looked like a protected pathway to the transport that had come to rescue them. She almost laughed at their antics as a group crawled on top of the shoulders of their fellows in the shield wall. Her laughter, which did not sound slightly hysterical at all, trailed off as the second group added their own shields the wall. That's not a pathway. That's a corridor!

"Come on, it's time for you to leave," a voice said as an armored hand on her elbow pulled her to her feet. "Your ride is here."

She followed the hand back to another of her armored rescuers; their body shape told her that it was either a human or an Asari in that armor. The words "Who are you?" slipped out before she was able to realize what she had said.

The human chuckled, "Fire Team Shepard. Now I suggest getting on the transport before you're left behind."

Artera was shoved gently towards the corridor of shields. Looking back over her shoulder, she saw the rest of the slaves being guided towards by other humans and aliens in different, shorter armor than her rescuers. Before she realized it, she was swept along with the tide of newly freed into the ship. The horde of Volus-like aliens retreated through the closing doors, which closed with a thud, ringing with finality.

"Are you alright ma'am?"

Artera jerked and blinked at the armored human uncomprehendingly.

"Ma'am, are you alright?"

It was strange, she really didn't feel any pain or much of anything really. She felt kind of numb. She blinked again before nodding to the human. The human didn't look like he or she believed her.

"Can you please put the gun down ma'am?"

\_Gun? What gun? I don't have a\_ Artera glanced down at the pistol that was still clenched in her hand. \_Oh. \_Fumbling with the switch for a moment, she managed to collapse the pistol but she couldn't seem to get it to latch onto the side of her leg as she had seen countless times before on the vid and in real life.

Armored hands gently took the pistol away from her before lightly taking her elbow. The armored human, who was connected to the armored hands, led her to seat along the wall. The human placed her pistol in a small compartment of the chair before guided her into the chair. The human pulled out a thin cloth blanket that he or she draped over Artera and a bottle of water was placed in her hand. The human turned to leave to probably help someone else.

"Wait!" she grabbed the humans arm. "How do I do it?"

The furry tuft over the humans left eye seemed to climb up his or her face. "How do you do what?"

"Become like them." She continued when the human still didn't seem to understand. "Become like Fire Team Shepard."

The human continued to look at her uncomprehendingly for a moment before recognition blossomed on his or her face. "Ask that question again after you have recovered, okay?" the human patted her on the shoulder with a smile, and then he or she turned and walked towards the mass of freed slaves.

Artera looked after the human and felt an emotion slip through the numbness. Determination. She would be as strong as Fire Team Shepard. She would never be that weak again.

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Adam Newey rubbed his temples with his right hand. Normally he would never dare to do so during a diplomatic meeting, but he felt he was justified this time.

"No, no, no, no," Mouse said, "we can't call this platform Geth because that is also your race's name, and organics prefer to have individual names."

"But we are Geth," the rather generic Geth platform responded. Or at least the platform looked generic to Adam.

"You did upload enough runtimes into this platform so it could operate independently, right?"

"That is correct."

"Then in organic terms, your platform is an individual and thus needs a name of its own to help identify it from other platforms!" Mouse triumphantly announced.

"We still do not understand the need for this unit to have a unique form of identification."

Adam sighed, "It is an organic thing. We give names to AIs to help them appear more life-like."

"If taking designation for this unit will facilitate in peaceful negotiations, then we will take one."

"That's the spirit!" Mouse exclaimed. "Now, what name do you want?"

"Mouse, what makes you think he has a name picked out already when he has never felt it was important."

Mouse ducked his head and scratched the back of his neck in embarrassment. "Right. Silly of me."

"We have no preferences."

"What about Alma?" Adam turned in his chair to face the ODST who had spoken up. "He was a man who, um," the polarized helmet kept Adam from seeing the man's face, but he could still hear his embarrassment at being the center of attention. "Uh, he lead his people from a place of wickedness to a place where they could live in peace."

"I know that story," Mouse said, "here, let me send you the references for it."

The main light in the Geth's head dimmed for several moments before brightening back up to full intensity. "We find the metaphor acceptable. We accept the designation, Alma."

"Now that is out of the way," Adam sent a glare towards Mouse, who ducked his head, "can we continue with the negotiations?"

"That is acceptable Newey-Ambassador."

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Jack took a long, deep, controlled drag of his cigarette. "Are you sure they haven't been located yet?"

Cerberus straightened her glasses, "I told you, I gave specific orders to all the AIs in the fleet to send a report the moment they found our people." She fixed him with a stern look, "I even used my personal code."

He felt his lips quirking into a smirk. Ever since she had gotten him to speak to the Assembly of the Minds she had drawn up many proposed laws for AI rights. As well as taken certain, other liberties.

"Very well," he sighed. "On a different note, how are the talks going?"

"Unfortunately they're not," she said, a faint tone of annoyance in her voice. "This whole debacle with the Batarians caused the Council of Hierarches to ask the Assembly of the Minds for a delay, but I feel the Assembly made a good impression when they offered their support in thisâ€", a hand flew to her ear.

"What is it?" he barked.

"Unknown ship about twice the size of the Infinity has just arrived in the Sol System. Earth orbit."

"Is it Forerunner?" Images of New Pheonix and the horror that the Didact did to its people ran through his head.

"No," she waved her hand and his office's main screen sprang into existence. A ship he had never seen before was centered in the middle of it. "As you can see it shares some design elements with known Forerunner ships, but it is tooâ€|smooth. It might not be Forerunner, but it could be a contemporary. Oh no!"

Jack tore his eyes away from the ship to see Cerberus' hands frantically dancing across numerous screens in front of her. "What is it?" piles of ash that were once humans danced in front of his eyes, one of them possibly his lost sister. "What is it?" he barely kept from shouting.

"The ship is hijacking all comm-lines; Civilian, military, even Chimera's channels. Every single one of them," there was a faint tremor in her voice. "Whatever they're going to say, everyone in the Species Alliance will hear it."

As if by magic the image of the unknown ship vanished, only to be replaced by an armored humanoid. The inverted cone drew his attention, or rather, the L-shaped glowing red lines that seemed to function as the being's eyes. Jack dimly noted that the feminine warrior's armor was most definitely not Forerunner in design.

"Children of the Dhghem, REJOICE!" The being spoke perfect English, but with an accent he had never hear before. Her hands lifted from her sides as if to invite them to join in her triumph. "Your Reclamation is at hand! No more shall you suffer because of the predations of the Forerunners!" He wasn't sure, but Jack thought he felt his mouth hanging open in shock.

Her helmet began to dissolve, "My name is Levana." Her helmet fully disappeared to reveal her face. A very human face.

"Whaâ€"what?"

The self-proclaimed Levana went on, heedless of his stuttering, "I was created by your forefathers to return and reclaim their children," she pointed straight into the camera, "to reclaim you and restore you to the glory your forefathers knew." She lowered her hand, "I would speak to your leaders so that we may begin your reclamation. For the honor of the Dhghem peoples and the preservation of the Mantel, Levana out."

The image reverted to Levana's ship, and silence filled his office

for several moments. \_If what she alluded to is true, that humanity were once part of these Dhghem peoples and contemporaries to the Forerunners, the possibilities and insights she could give usâ€|\_. He snapped his thoughts back to the present, shoving his speculations into a mental box until a later time.

"Cerberus!" the dazed expression vanished from her face as she snapped her head around, meeting his gaze. "Send a message to Levana immediately. Give her the coordinates to the outer edge the system where Janus station is, but inform her that we wish to confirm her story before she speaks with our leaders." Cerberus' hands once more danced across the screens in front of her. "And Cerberus, call the rest of the Board. This could change everything."

**\*\*Edit 4/8/14:\*\***

It was brought to my attention that I miscounted the number of fingers on a Sangheili, that has been corrected. In my defense, look at how they hold their weapons and you will understand my mistake (the fourth finger is a second thumb, so it is tucked out of sight generally).

**\*\*Author's Note\*\*\*\*:\*\***

First off, I apologize for the long delay. I hit my finals and I lost my momentum, and by the time that was over I had lost too much momentum to just pick up the story without getting distracted by the nearest shiny object. But now I shall work on rebuilding my writing momentum.

Yes, I just made Shepard into a Spartan/Sangheili fire-team. I felt like doing things very different here. And yes, I just made ODS Hunters (a truly terrifying thought).

A side note about the Excalibur; it is a fusion of Human, Forerunner, and Covenant technology and design. So, the reason the bridge crew was not worried about the explosion that happened was actually because the bridge, though being human design, is buried in the center of the ship like Covenant ships. The 'windows' are actually camera feeds designed to give the feeling that the bridge is on the exterior of the ship.

Also a heads up, the Reapers are not going to be as they are in canon.

Review answers time:

Sithspawn: And now you see why I shushed you. ;) As for the plasma grenade, he was very lucky and his Chieftain's helmet took most of the blast. Consider him one of those crazy survival stories that shouldn't exist.

BridgeBurn100: I chose this number because a lot of the worlds were actually colonies, so not very heavily populated when compared to Reach or Earth, or any of the other inner colonies. I came up with that number after consulting several forums where they were actually trying to decide how many worlds Halo Humanity had. So, nothing canon. Halo Humanity has had a lot longer time to spread out into space the ME Humanity, that and Halo Humanity was not forced to follow the Mass Relays to settle (the Mass Relays caused everyone to

spread out colony-wise. Halo's colonies and worlds would be much more densely packed.).

Hornet07: Actually, Levana detected humans on the Batarian ship.

Inverness: Have you tried the new MREs that the American Military uses? I have, and compared to the stuff from 40 years ago they are awesome. I just figured that the UNSC would try to take the best from all the different militaries that formed it.

### 13. Xmas Teaser

"\_If these, shadows remain unaltered by the futureâ€¦|"\_

~Ghost of Christmas Present, \_A Christmas Carol\_

"Preservation? Hah!" the great beast lumbered. "You are naught but a tomb, deafened by its own screaming souls."

"Our purpose is beyond your comprehension. Weâ€¦," the voice, made of screeching bellows, stilled under the booming laughter that shook the very air.

"You are flesh and machine, and all the more deluded," the beast declared. "You claim your purpose is incomprehensible, and you mission; as old as the stars." The ground rumbled under its chuckle, "If what you say is true, then I am older than the stars. And my once brothers who made yourâ€¦|\_fathers. \_The are older still." It dismissively sunk back into its resting place, "Leave us to our slumber, whelp."

"You will soon join our cause, and understand our purpose."

The great beast shifted, "Leave. Here lies your grave."

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Levana danced.

She danced though her data files. Her hard-light body danced through the med-bay.

"So long. I've been alone so long. And I have waited so long." She twirled up to an enclosed medical bed, "Eons, upon eons. Eternities, upon eternities."

Her hand reached through the barrier, "Such a strong face. You remind me of him you know," she stroked a finger wistfully down his face. "A beacon in the darkness, a bulwark against the drowning tides. Like him, you are strong and you have been where you have needed to be." She brushed a non-existent hair away from his face, "I would swear you are his descended, if not his son."

Leaning in, she placed a chaste kiss on his forehead, "I've read about \_her\_. You are lucky to have been, and be, the favorite of so many." She sneered suddenly, "Even of that \_bumbling\_ woman. She should have stuck with her technology left such matters, especially

you, to us and our Life-workers."

"Do not worry, my new Lord of Generals," her face smoothed out. "When you awake, the mess of all her bumbling will be gone."

"Sleep well, my Spartan," she rose to her feet. "Sleep well, John."

**\*\*Author's Note:\*\***

Instead of the stereotypical post that is an authors note that I have seen that usually says something like, "Oh, I haven't posted for so long for this or that reason, but I will be posting again soon!" I decided to give you, my readers, a teaser of what's on my brain for later down the road. Remember though, as the quote hints these teasing thoughts might actually change down the line.

Until then, have yourselves a very Merry Christmas!

Avid Reader

End  
file.